EUROPEAN POLICY CENTRE

14 March 2017

DISCUSSION PAPER

The 2017 elections across Europe: facts, expectations and consequences

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European democracy: baptism by vote or by fire?

Corina Stratulat

Europe gets a break...

From today's perspective, Europe will most likely avoid a hard landing in the elections lined up throughout 2017 in key member states because mainstream parties will probably manage to snap victory from the jaws of radical populists, at least this time around. As Dutch voters prepare to go to the polls first (15 March), the French, Germans and Italians will follow suit this April/May, September, and maybe before the end of the year, respectively. In all these four founding countries of the European project, radical, anti-establishment forces on the (far) left or (far) right side of the political spectrum are riding the gusty populist headwinds that have ushered in Brexit and Trump elsewhere, raising the stakes of the vote for each national context in question, as well as for the European Union (EU) as a whole.

This study looks at these four upcoming elections, presenting in each case the domestic political dynamics at play, assessing various possible governing coalitions in the aftermath of the vote and considering the potential implications of the different likely outcomes for national policymaking and European affairs. The analyses suggest that the characteristics of these elections fit with the populist trend witnessed in many countries, in the EU and beyond. Populism has been on the march in Europe – increasing steadily from 6.7% (right) and 2.4% (left) of the vote in the 1960s to 13.4% (right) and 2.7% (left) in the 2010s[1] – and the likes of the Dutch Freedom Party (PVV), French Front National (FN), Alternative for Germany (AfD), and Italy's 5 Star Movement, all discussed here, still fare well in national polls. Yet, the individual case studies of this publication argue that actual voting behavior and the mathematics of coalition-building post-elections may well stop radical populists in their tracks for now.

That Europe is not just simply and inevitably heading down a nationalist, protectionist, EU/euro-antagonist, anti-Islam, and illiberal path is good news for several inter-related reasons. For one, it proves wrong the fear mongers and all the fatalist prophets of doom claiming that 2017 will be worse than the previous year.

The King Baudouin Foundation is the strategic partner of the European Policy Centre

Moreover, it puts a dent in the narrative that the anti-establishment populists are poised to dominate politics henceforth. In addition, it shows that internally-strong mainstream European parties, reform-minded and pro-EU politicians (even when 'outsiders'), as well as cosmopolitan, tolerant, level-headed, and inclusive public sentiments are still at work, relentlessly seeking – thus far successfully – to counter a populist takeover. Finally, it offers at least temporary relief that the Union will not commit collective suicide by having member states vote in office politicians who want to take their countries out of core European integration projects (like the euro or Schengen) or the EU altogether. Overall, this conjecture gives hope at a time of uncertainty when it is badly needed.

...but not a free pass

But the thickness of the silver lining should not be overestimated. There is no automatism in the breathing space Europe may get in these elections: radical populists are not a mood; they manifest a trend[2], which is irrigated and fuelled by deep, structural and complex problems. The danger of a more regressive and closed Europe, where crucial values, orientations, norms, and principles are undermined, has not been overcome.[3] When the dust of these elections settles, most of the problems will still be unresolved, increasing the risk that the populist nuisance shall return with a vengeance at the very next opportunity. The four cases scrutinised here reveal some common features and driving forces of the populist phenomenon.

Public Euroscepticism, for example, is a growing challenge documented in all these founding member states, especially insofar as it creates a volatile electoral pool easily swayed by new/worsening crises, from which populist parties can comfortably fish votes. To a large extent, EU/euro-critical attitudes among citizens stem from widespread disappointment with the lack of effective reactions, let alone solutions, rightly or not pinned on Brussels to the mounting and overlapping troubles confronting Europe – most notably, the increase of (illegal) migration, a spate of terrorist attacks, and ongoing economic and social woes. The more the EU struggles to manage immigration, the more a white majority of national electorates focuses on security concerns and becomes receptive to ethnic and religious stereotyping by far-right populists. In a similar vein, the more the EU stumbles in its efforts to deal with socio-economic distress and inequality, the more Europeans feel insecure about the future for themselves and the next generations, and the more they are amenable to parties that invariably link the rapid diminution of people's economic prosperity to (East European, Balkan, Syrian or Muslim) newcomers or else to the euro and free trade. Indeed, hostility to immigration, above all, is a central theme of populist parties and a significant part of the campaigns in each of the upcoming elections considered here.

In this sense, if European cooperation is no longer perceived as part of the solution, public support for the Union as it stands withers. If the EU is then also seen as part of the problem – either because it imposes on the member states unworkable solutions that are seen to disregard the interests of 'ordinary people' or policies that limit national governments' sovereignty – citizens find all the more reason to take a dim view of European integration. To be sure, as the case studies illustrate, mainstream parties still eschew the possibility of politicising Europe domestically, in that they do not try to differentiate themselves from other parties in EU terms or to make promises related to European integration that are risky (such as referenda on EU membership) or in vain (knowing that decisions also depend on 26/27 other member states). However, the EU is increasingly used by radical populist parties – directly (for example, when calling for their country to leave the eurozone) or indirectly (for instance, by association with the unsolved refugee crisis and terrorism threat) – as a hammer with which to beat the establishment.

Yet, to really understand the nature of Euroscepticism and the way it often relates to the surge in support for radical populist parties in the member states, it is important to place it in the wider framework of the problems of governance as a whole. "[A]lthough we might be more sceptical about Europe today, it is becoming less and less easy to specify what precisely is European, and what is national."[4] The boundaries are increasingly blurred. As European integration advances, as competences are often shared and the same political actors act on both levels, it becomes difficult to argue that Europe "hits home"[5] because the nation

state also "hits Europe"[6], so much so that it might be possible to conceive at this point of a "molecular theory of Europe".[7] The closer the EU and domestic political arenas become bound together, the stronger the implication that Euroscepticism entails a more generalised 'polity scepticism'. Thus, Euroscepticism can be said to go hand in hand with broader challenges of representative government at the national level, including distrust of mainstream politicians and their ability to respond to voters, pessimism about people's ability to change policy (such as through elections), and popular disengagement from the arena of conventional politics. Put differently, scepticism towards national political elites becomes intertwined with scepticism towards the elitist European project, and *vice versa*.

Without much hope of bringing change through a collective voice, and without much trust in established institutions, parties and processes to correct mistakes, representative democracy is in crisis. Angry 'outsiders' intervene to fill in the vacuum created by the collapse of the major parties[8] still hanging on to old cleavages (church versus secularism, capital versus labour) when, in fact, appeals to immigration, security and identity seem now to be a more effective way to titillate voters. Little surprise then that the analyses here depict a fragmented domestic political map in the individual countries, in which the winning governing coalition and its policy line is difficult to predict and uncertainty reigns supreme. Saying then that the mainstream parties will ultimately manage to take the winds out of the populist sails in these upcoming votes – as positive an outcome as that might be – is to fail to grasp the fragility of all things political these days. Election results that are expected to look depressingly like the *status quo* will only create a false sense of stability – the underlying problems remain, along with the radical populist insurrection that they foster against the political establishment.

But the story is even more complex than merely saying that political parties' withdrawal from society and surrender of decision-making capacity in many policy areas to actors outside the domestic realm of politics (notably at the EU level) has opened up space for radical populist challengers. Parties have grown out of touch with electoral demands also because, to the extent that they want to act responsibly and listen to voters, it has become increasingly difficult to understand what electorates want. The individualisation of societies, the breakdown of traditional large constituencies, the volatility of issue preferences and alignments all make it difficult for today's mainstream political parties to synthesise the various demands or translate popular interests into distinct policy alternatives.[9] Instead of broad networks (like trade unions, churches or whatever) that bred loyal supporters in the past, parties face now unpredictable and critical citizens, whose higher levels of education and unfettered access to information and communication technologies in the internet age, has increased their expectation of politicians, as well as their ability to organise themselves in order to demand political participation and deliberate issues. The emancipation of electorates, together with the polarisation of modern societies – particularly into 'winners' and 'losers' of change – is thus another factor that undermines elites' competence (or people's perception of it), creating a fertile ground for populist political entrepreneurs. And again, this challenge too will remain even if the outcome of the 2017 elections does not spell disaster. Modern political systems will continue to struggle as long as the manifold sources of anxiety are not adequately addressed at national, European and the global level.

Are elites listening yet?

All this suggests that the momentum at the end of this year's electoral cycle should be used wisely to start tackling enduring and fundamental problems that trouble citizens. The election of Trump and the result of the Brexit referendum can each be compared to "a brick chucked through the window of the elites"[10] by citizens who feel ignored in their anguish. The conclusions of the case studies in this paper might help to steady the nerves of those fearing that the populist epidemic will grip Europe in 2017. But many Dutch, French, German, and Italian voters share the perception that mainstream political forces are insufficiently concerned, and traditional political channels insufficiently responsive, to their dissatisfaction. Are the hope mongers and political leaders hearing these voices now?

Despite the cautiously optimistic message of this study, the danger of 'shortism' and complacency is real. The prospects of structural reforms and major leaps forward in European integration are at best meagre.

Following the logic of some of the scenarios on the future of the Union included in the European Commission's recent White Paper[11], incremental policy advances, perhaps based merely on coalitions of the willing, is the more likely way ahead. But 'muddling through' following an incremental, step-by-step process on the basis of the lowest common denominator is not enough.

European governments and EU institutions must find a way to effectively deal with the negative forces of globalisation and its tensions with sovereign democracy; alternatively, they will continue to struggle with the backlash against globalisation without legitimacy.[12] Pragmatism on immediate economic and security priorities should not preclude (starting to think about) a vision of how to better translate democratic goals into practice while keeping up with contemporary societal, economic and political realities.[13] Mainstream politicians might be able to buy themselves time in these upcoming elections, not least because Europeans seem currently hesitant about voting anti-establishment parties into office and risk adding to the geo-political and economic uncertainties prompted by the new US administration and the UK decision to leave the Union. However, without foresight and a persuasive narrative on why European integration continues to be a 'win-win' exercise for the member states and their citizens, mainstream politicians are also recklessly flirting with potential disaster looming in the future.

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2 Krastev, Ivan (2016), "After Brexit, Europe's dueling nostalgias", *The New York Times*, Opinion, 14 July 2016.

3 Emmanouilidis, Janis A. and Zuleeg, Fabian (2016), "EU@60 - Countering a regressive and illiberal Europe", paper prepared for the EPC's 20th Anniversary Conference, Brussels: European Policy Centre.

4 Mair, Peter (2006), "Polity-scepticism, party failings, and the challenge to European democracy", Uhlenbeck Lecture 24, Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study.

5 Börzel, Tanja and Risse, Thomas (2000), "When Europe hits home: Europeanisation and domestic change", *European Integration online Papers*, Volume 4, Number 15.

6 Beyers, Jan and Trondal, Jarle (2004), "How nation-states 'hit' Europe: ambiguity and representation in the European Union", *West European Politics*, Volume 27, Number 5, pp. 919-942.

7 Bulmer, Simon and Lequesne, Christian (eds.) (2005), *The member states of the European Union*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

8 Lilla Mark quoted in Zakaria, Fareed (2017), "Don't despair yet: the center can still win in Europe", *The Washington Post*, Opinions, 23 February 2016.

9 Mair, Peter (2011), "Bini Smaghi vs. the parties: representative government and institutional constraints", EUI Working Paper RSCAS 22, p. 9. See also, Schmitter, Phillippe C. (2008), "The changing politics of organised interests", *West European Politics*, Volume 21, Number 1-2, pp. 195.210 and Mair, Peter (2013), *Ruling the void: the hollowing of Western democracy*, London, New York: Verso.

10 David Wong blog at http://www.cracked.com/blog/6-reasons-trumps-rise-that-no-one-talks-about/, last accessed on: 12/03/2017.

11 The European Commission (2017), "White Paper on the future of Europe: reflections and scenarios for the EU27 by 2025", COM(2017)2025, 1 March 2017.

12 Rodrik, Dani (2011), "The globalization paradox: democracy and the future of the world economy," Norton.

13 On this idea, see also Stratulat, Corina (2016), "The enemy within: are modern European democracies afraid of introspection?", *EPC Policy Brief*, Brussels: European Policy Centre.

The Dutch elections: fragmentation and a normalised EU debate

Adriaan Schout

International perceptions of the Dutch elections

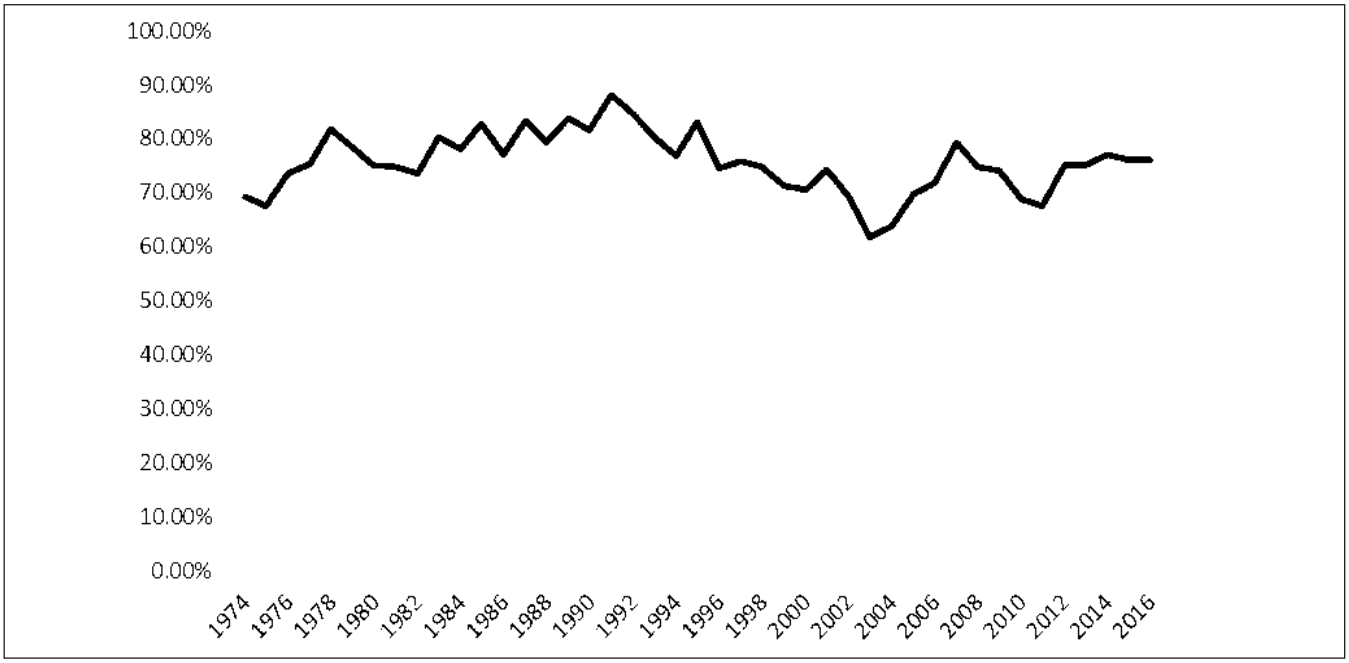
The first striking element of the upcoming Dutch elections on 15 March is the extent to which the Netherlands is represented in the international media as an EU-critical country: many international media outlets focus on the allegedly strong position of the populist radical-right leader, Geert Wilders, and his Freedom Party (PVV)[1], and even speculate about a possible Nexit.[2] The underlying expectation seems to be that after Donald Trump's victory, the path is now cleared for politicians such as Wilders and Marine Le Pen in France to take centre stage. Yet the picture of the Netherlands as a highly EU-critical country needs some qualification.

Firstly, the Netherlands is traditionally one of the member states with the highest levels of support for the European Union (generally above 70%, see Figure 1). Also, the country's conservative governments have consistently opted in the EU's core policies, from Schengen, to the euro, the third rescue package for Greece, and many more. As an open-trading nation, and being bound to German markets and industrial sectors, Dutch governments have been strongly oriented towards economic integration.

Secondly, Geert Wilders draws attention to his anti-EU messages because he appears to be more outspoken than his opponents, as well as clearer (his party's electoral programme consists of one page with 11 statements that are short on politically-correct language). According to Wierd Duk, a journalist from *Algemeen Dagblad*, this image of "telling it as it is" tends to appeal to a part of the electorate. However, it does not mean that his potential voters also support his views. For example, Wilders wants to leave the EU notwithstanding the indication that 75% of his electorate are in favour of remaining in the internal market.[3]

Thirdly, as in the elections of 2012, his party dropped in the polls as the election date draws closer. At the start of 2017, Wilders had almost 25% of the votes[4] but this figure plunged to 15% by early March (still a gain compared to the current 10% of the seats that the PVV holds in the Parliament). Thus, there seems to be a difference between flirting with the Freedom Party and actually voting for it. Yet, since Wilders is very popular among young voters, his election result will partly depend on the extent to which this group of first-time voters turn out to vote on election day (young voters often have a low turnout).

Figure 1: Support for EU membership in the Netherlands



Source: Dekker (2013); Eurobarometer.

Yet, the generally strong support for the EU in the Netherlands should not be confused with enthusiasm for European integration: support does not mean affection. Dutch voters score the lowest when it comes to "feeling affiliation" with other Europeans (5% compared to 29% in Germany). Moreover, test panels show that attitudes towards the EU can easily shift under the influence of, in particular, negative opinions.[5] This makes support for the EU rather volatile. Apart from periods of intense EU crises, such as during the Greek crisis, interest in the EU is rather mediocre: only 5% of the voters base their electoral choice on the EU as a political theme. On average, the Dutch think they know a lot about the European Union, whereas tested knowledge of the EU in polls is only average.[6] Finally, some polls show more EU-critical inclinations but polls are difficult to compare given, for example, fluctuations over time, with a temporary drop in support for the EU during the euro crisis.

This discussion suggests that there is general support for the EU in the Netherlands, but this is sensitive to (negative) news about the EU (for example, fresh problems in the eurozone countries or growing migration flows). Therefore, it seems safe to assume that future plans for deeper European integration may run into difficulties in terms of public support in the Netherlands, though Dutch people could be more favourably disposed to flexible forms of European cooperation. The EU is generally not a matter of yes or no, but more part of normal political discourse, where some want more integration in one policy area and others may want something less or different in the same field (see below). After a long period of permissive consensus, the EU has become a normal political issue in Dutch debates.[7]

Fragmentation

A second defining feature of these forthcoming Dutch elections is fragmentation. There are 28 parties on the ballot list and 50% of the voters are still undecided. Looking at the polls, one of the main questions is whether the elections will result in a stable government or whether, as happened, for example, in 1977, a long period of negotiations between potential coalition partners will follow the vote. Since four or five parties may be necessary to compose the more than 75 seats needed in the Parliament (out of a total of 150 seats), including the possibility for bigger political and party-cultural differences, the question is whether the next government will last for long.

Apart from Geert Wilders' PVV, the other main political contenders in these elections form a sizeable group of mostly centrist parties. TV channels organising election debates even have difficulties designing workable formats for discussions among six or eight party leaders, or deciding which parties to invite, given the sometimes razor thin differences in support for these parties in the polls.

The current government had a marginal majority of 79 seats. It consisted of the centre-right Liberal party (VVD) of Prime Minister Rutte and the centre-left Labour Party (PvdA) with a new party leader, Lodewijk Asscher. This coalition survived the four years in office thanks to a loyal opposition of parties that came to the rescue, backing the government whenever additional support was needed such as implementing drastic cutbacks and economic reforms. The willingness to find consensus between the government and different opposition parties underlined the political will in the Dutch Parliament to ensure political stability. Parties supporting the past government included the more left-leaning Liberal party (D66) and the smaller Christian parties (ChristenUnie, SGP). D66 has somewhat of a reputation as a party popular among undecided voters. With many voters still pondering on their preferences, D66 could thus end up having a strong electoral showing.

The Christian Democratic Party (CDA) headed by Sybrand Buma has made a comeback during the past four years. Aware of the need for a new profile, it opted for opposition status. This exposed it to criticism from the "loyal opposition" for attempting to avoid responsibility for the economic reforms. The election debates have shown that Buma has developed into a centre-right contender for Rutte. The Christian Democrats campaigned against wider application of the euthanasia law, against the formalisation of production and delivery of soft drugs to coffee shops, in support of tougher sentences for habitual criminals, higher spending on defence and, especially more attention for norms and values (learning the national anthem at school, a social year for students leaving school).

A growing star among the candidates is young Jesse Klaver (30), the head of Green Party (GroenLinks), who has Obama-like ambitions, borrows from Obama's lexicon in his speeches and resorted to innovative campaign methods organising, for example, "meetup" sessions (political rallies) to offer "hope and change".[8] Under his leadership, the Green Party rose from 4 to 17 seats in the polls. GroenLinks is left of centre and belongs to the Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance in the European Parliament. Apart from its core theme of sustainable development, the Green Party favours a much more flexible approach to welcoming refugees and abolishment of the "own risk", together with a broad package of entitlements for health care.

Quite clearly, there are differences between the policy stances of the main contenders but, on the whole, these elections lack central themes and reveal a crowded mid-spectrum, which makes it difficult for the voters to settle on one party or the other. The Green Party is the only one with a more distinct and outspoken – left-leaning – profile.

In terms of size, two parties that are also worth mentioning include the Socialist Party (SP), traditionally in favour of big government and free health care, and the 50PLUS Party, a strong defender of the rights of pensioners. However, given their expenditure-intensive policy priorities, these two parties will not fit easily in a grand coalition. In fact, entitlements for pensioners is a major issue for both of these parties. SP wants to bring the retirement age, currently at 67 years, back to 65 (to be partly paid by cut backs in defence).

All other parties are expected to be of little interest in terms of election results. Table 1 offers some clues about the different combinations possible/needed to form a government. Some caveats are in order: the Socialist Party has ruled out a governing alliance with Rutte's Liberal Party, while Rutte has categorically dismissed Wilders' PVV from a future coalition government. Even though the first Rutte government was supported by the PVV, Rutte made it clear that he would not try this again because it would harm his credibility in defending Dutch interests at the European and international level. For the rest, as the table below shows, only two combinations of 4 or 5 political parties can probably result in a (small) majority. Still, it should be recalled that the prospects of the last Rutte government also looked slim and yet became a reality thanks to the compromising political culture of the Dutch centrist parties. Perhaps the same will happen this year as well.

Table 1: Distribution of seats in the Dutch Parliament (5 March 2017 poll)

	Seats in Parliament 2012	1-1-2017	5-3-2017
PVV	15	35	25
VVD	41	23	24
CDA	13	15	21
GroenLinks	4	14	17
D66	12	14	17
SP	15	11	13
PvdA	38	10	10
ChristenUnie	5	5	5
Partij voor de Dieren	2	5	5
50PLUS	2	11	5
SGP	3	3	3
DENK		3	2
Forum voor Democratie		2	2
VNL		1	1
Total	150	150	150
VVD+PvdA	79	33	34
VVD+PVV	56	58	49
VVD+CDA+D66	66	52	62
VVD+CDA+D66+PvdA	104	62	72
VVD+CDA+D66+SP	81	63	75
VVD+CDA+D66+GroenLinks	70	66	79
CDA+D66+GroenLinks+PvdA+SP	82	64	76

Source: @mauricedehond[9]

The Dutch elections and the EU

Despite the sometimes heated debates on European integration in the Netherlands over, for example, deeper integration or rescue packages, the EU is not a major theme in the current election campaign. The issues that seem to preoccupy Dutch voters in these elections include[10]: healthcare (18%), social security (15%), economy (12%), norms and values (10%), safety and terrorism (9%), the integration of Muslims (7%), education (6%), EU (5%), environment (4%), and the international situation (3%). Other polls mention migration as one of the core themes. Some of the major questions of these election debates concern the financing of healthcare (some parties want to abolish the "own risk" threshold of EUR 360 that was introduced as a disincentive) and pensions (with some parties pleading to reinstate the retirement age of 65), as well as integration/migration issues linked to the ability of newcomers to adapt to Dutch norms and values (especially in view of, among others, growing concerns over discrimination of LGTBs and the influence of the Turkish government among Turks in the Netherlands).

As regards the party programmes, most candidates want a reformed EU. The five parties in the centre (CDA, D66, Groenlinks, PvdA and VVD), and two additional marginal parties, think that the EU is essential but should be improved. Ten parties are more critical and want a completely different Union, six favour NEXIT, and five do not mention the EU. The reforms the five centrist parties would like to see include issues such as the need for more democracy at the EU level (Greens & D66), providing own resources for the EU budget (D66), better-managed labour mobility based on equal pay for equal work (PvdA), deepening of the energy union (PvdA), as well as core groups (Christian Democrats) and a more pragmatic EU, oriented towards solutions, such as in the context of the migrant crisis or pending economic reforms in some member states (VVD). D66 is most outspoken and even argues for a European army and stronger roles for the European Parliament and the European Commission (including the related Treaty revisions). A short review of the programmes cannot do justice to the richness of their positions on the EU. Underlining that the EU is part of their political outlook in all areas, D66 does not have a separate chapter on the EU. The VVD emphasises in its chapter on the EU: economic interests, a need for the EU to focus on major issues only, and the need for countries to respect the EU rules to which they have agreed. PvdA focuses more on fairness. The Christian Democrats and Rutte's VVD are in favour of the ultimate punishment of euro-exit for non-reforming countries.

The more EU-critical parties want to remain in the EU but demand far-reaching reforms, advocating *inter alia* limiting the role of the European Commission (Socialist Party), a much more environmentally-friendly EU (Party for the Animals), greater subsidiarity, and the abolition of the EU flag (Christian parties). As regards the EU-critical parties, some are plainly against the EU (PVV and the VNL (Voor Nederland) or want a referendum regarding the Netherland's EU membership (Thierry Baudet's new party, Forum for Democracy). The overview of positions on the EU suggests that European integration will not be a major obstacle in the negotiations for the next government as there is ample scope for compromise. Overall, the main centrist parties are interested in improving the EU.

The Dutch elections among the other key elections of 2017

The French and the German elections will probably prove more important for the EU discussions and policies in the Netherlands than the Dutch election debates. There seems to be some apprehension in The Hague regarding possible new visionary plans from the traditional French-German motor of European integration. A victory of Martin Schulz in Germany and Emmanuel Macron in France might lead to new European ambitions that could go beyond what the Netherlands would support. This may also explain why these upcoming elections in the Netherlands are not so much about the EU. The Netherlands is a smaller member state with limited influence in the EU. The 2012 elections resulted in a rather traumatic experience for the Liberal Party (VVD) of Mark Rutte because he had promised in that campaign that no more money would be spent on the Greek euro crisis. This promise was broken when the third rescue package for Greece was agreed upon in 2015. There now seems to be a realisation among Dutch parties with experience in government that it is risky to make promises when there are 26 or 27 other member states involved in the decisions taken at the EU level. Electoral pledges about the future of the EU are thus hard to substantiate. By the same token, if France and Germany would agree to major new leaps forward in European integration, for example, in regard to economic governance, the next Dutch government(s) will probably have a hard time trying to sell Europe at home.

Similarly, one might have expected that other issues, such as the consequences of Brexit, or the doubts that exist concerning the sustainability of the euro in the long run, would have played important roles in these Dutch elections. Yet, there would have been few political relevant choices to be discussed at this stage and the Netherlands is but one of the many voices in the EU debates ahead. Hence, although the EU is a topic with many facets, it appears that the Dutch elections are not so much about the EU, after all.

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1 See, for example, "Dutch elections: all you need to know", *The Guardian*, 2 March 2017, found at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/02/dutch-parliamentary-elections-everything-you-need-to-know-brexit-vote-trump-geert-wilders?CMP=share_btn_tw, last accessed on: 9/03/2017.

2 "Will Dutch follow Brexit with Nexit?", *BBC*, 7 July 2016.

3 @Mauricedehond, found at: https://www.noties.nl/v/get.php?r=pp170605&f=De+5+scenario's+voor+de+Europese+Unie.pdf, last accessed on: 9/03/2017.

4 See @Mauricedehond. A discussion on differences between polls and reliability of polls is avoided here. The pattern in the polls concerning the PVV is rather clear.

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6 *Burgerperspectieven* (2016), Continue Bevolkingsonderzoek, Den Haag: SCP.

7 Schout, Adriaan and Rood, Jan (2013), *op. cit.*

8 "The 'Jessiah': the Dutch progressive trying to turn back the populist tide", *The Guardian*, 6 March 2017, found at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/06/the-jessiah-dutch-progressive-populist-jesse-klaver, last accessed on: 9/03/2017.

9 @Mauricedehond, found at: https://www.noties.nl/v/get.php?a=peil.nl&s=weekpoll&f=2017-03-05.pdf, last accessed on: 9/03/2017.

10 "Meeste kiezers gaan voor inhoud, kieswijzers beperkte invloed", 03/03/2017, found at: http://www.nipo.nl/nieuws/persberichten/meeste-kiezers-gaan-voor-inhoud,-kieswijzers-beper/, last accessed on: 11/03/2017.

The upcoming French elections: the country's openness at stake

Yann-Sven Rittelmeyer

Concerns are growing over the outcome of the upcoming French presidential (April/May 2017) and legislative (June 2017) elections. Investors fear a victory of the far-right leader Marine Le Pen, which could lead to a massive default on France's sovereign debt due to Le Pen's promise to reintroduce a national currency.[1] Member states are worried by this scenario but also by the high degree of unpredictability regarding France's future European and foreign policies.

The French right and left primaries have signalled a desire for change at the level of political leadership. Former Prime Ministers Manuel Valls and Alain Juppé lost the vote, former President Nicolas Sarkozy failed to reach the second round, and incumbent President François Hollande decided not to seek re-election in light of his unpopularity. The French political spectrum is in great flux, making the result of the upcoming elections very difficult to predict.

Two months before the elections, the race is still wide open with four candidates polling at more than 15%: Marine Le Pen (Front National), François Fillon (Les Républicains), Emmanuel Macron (En Marche!) and Benoît Hamon (Parti socialiste). The French right primary used to be regarded as an early presidential election as its winner was considered having the best chances to be France's next President. But Fillon, who won the primary in November 2016, is facing several fraud and corruption allegations and might not reach the second round. The winner of the French left primary, Benoît Hamon, struggles to secure support even inside his own party and might also not make it past the first round. These two candidates of the main traditional governing parties (Parti socialiste and Les Républicains)[2] are to some extent 'outsiders' given that their surprise victory in the primaries relied on the support of only a handful of elected officials and leading figures from their parties.

Alternative candidates are on the rise. The former Minister of the Economy, Emmanuel Macron, is running without the support of a political party. This allows him to pose as an 'anti-establishment candidate' but is simultaneously raising questions about his ability to secure a majority in the parliament if he is elected President. Le Pen has long followed a strategy consisting of criticising the ruling parties. Over the last years, she has invested a lot of effort in boosting the respectability of her party. The 'cordon sanitaire' – the mainstream parties' resolve to unite against an extremist candidate – could prevent Le Pen from becoming President, provided it holds in spite of its increasing fragility.

But given the risks incurred, the centrist figure François Bayrou (Mouvement démocrate) decided not to run again and proposed an alliance with Macron, which the latter immediately accepted. In a similar vein, the Greens will for the first time since they have emerged on the political scene in the 70s, not run with their own candidate but join forces with the socialists before the first round.

In this volatile context, France's partners are eager to understand what kind of President and European policies they can expect in the follow up to the French presidential and legislative elections. Depending on the results, France could start advocating radically different options for the European Union on key challenges such as the migration issue, the future of the eurozone, the internal market or trade relations with third countries. Some noticeable divergences are also apparent between the positions defended so far by the French political parties, on the one hand, and those defended by the presidential candidates, on the other. But the ability of the next President to implement the policies he/she promoted during the campaign could be affected by the institutional configuration in case the winner faces difficulties in securing a parliamentary majority. If classic divides such as left-right and between extremist parties and mainstream parties still help to explain the respective positions of the parties and the presidential candidates on most of the EU-related issues, the key determinant appears to be the question of how open France should be.

A façade consensus on European integration and foreign policy

Prima facie, the main French political parties seem to share a pro-European line. Apart from the far-right Front National and the far-left Front de Gauche, all other parties are in favour of more European integration. But this basic position is accompanied by a strong critical discourse on the current state, functioning and development of the Union. To set himself apart from the other candidates, Macron is making the case for a more ambitious Europe, while different parties propose different strategies for moving Europe forward. For example, the conservatives are promoting intergovernmental methods. Fillon's Europe Programme is inspired by De Gaulle's vision of the European integration project and is thus based on the idea of building the EU with full respect for France's sovereignty and the French nation. The socialists are more open to supranational solutions but many voices inside the party – including Hamon – are very critical of the way the EU has developed and the economic policies it has adopted during the crises. Yet, since the 2005 referendum campaign on the Constitutional Treaty, the party has been divided on Europe and thus avoids putting too strong of an emphasis on European affairs.

Similar disagreements between the main ruling parties and their two extremist opponents can also be observed in relation to foreign and security policy. Following the Ukrainian crisis, the French political class was largely supportive of sanctions against Russia. In the current context of heightened insecurity in the EU's neighbourhood and in the light of the United States' disengagement, the same parties are also warming up to the idea of developing a common European defence. However, the 2017 French presidential elections could bring a number of potentially important changes in terms of party political lines. The conservative candidate Fillon is known for his close ties to Russia – the same applies to Le Pen – and advocates a *rapprochement* with Moscow, including lifting economic sanctions and developing an economic partnership in the medium to long run. Therefore, the French policy towards Russia would remain unchanged only if Macron or Hamon win the election.

On the sensitive topic of a common European defence, many divergences and nuances exist. All main candidates have announced an increase in the defence budget but have expressed rather different ideas about how to spend it. Marine Le Pen and Jean-Luc Mélenchon (Front de Gauche) want to exit NATO's integrated command and focus on national defence. Even among those backing a common European defence, the tendency is to embrace a cautious approach, consisting of pooling military and industrial resources, creating a European fund to support interventions and requesting more efforts from Germany. Fillon has clearly rejected the idea of an integrated European defence and indicated that he supported an "Alliance" of European Defence based on structured and enhanced cooperation.

Left-right cleavage challenged on economic and migration issues

A left-right cleavage is clearly visible on two of the key challenges facing the EU: the migration/refugee crisis and the economic crisis. France's attitude towards migrants will certainly differ according to who is elected President. The right-wing candidates, Fillon and Le Pen, both oppose the arrival of new refugees. Le Pen goes as far as to want France to leave Schengen and re-establish national borders, while Fillon calls first for further reform of the Schengen system but does not rule out the possibility of re-establishing controls at national borders if external borders are not well protected. In contrast, the two other main candidates – Macron and Hamon – have a much more open attitude towards migrants. During the left primary, the socialist candidate took the view that France should have welcomed more refugees in order to live up to its values. Macron has also criticised France's attitude during the refugee crisis and praised Angela Merkel's open door policy, which "saved our collective dignity".[3] Despite the fact that Macron's campaign is based on overcoming the left-right divide, he can be portrayed as socially progressive, liberal-minded on economic issues and European by conviction. Thus, he considers that welcoming refugees is a moral duty but also thinks that migrants are good for the economy.

On economic issues too, the left and right do not see eye to eye. Left-wing parties demand more public spending and a regulated market, whereas right-wing parties plea for budgetary discipline and a free market. The Front National is difficult to place because its economic programme is based on protectionism and national solutions

but adds to the mix proposals that lean both leftward (retirement at 60 with 40 years of contributions, 35-hour working week), as well as rightward (lower social contributions for small and medium-sized enterprises, corporate tax reduction). Most economists consider such a "catch-all" manifesto unsustainable.[4] If Le Pen were to be elected, she also promised to take France out of the eurozone and reinstate a national currency, with potentially dramatic consequences for France and the EU. As President, Macron would be expected to follow an economic path similar to the one he took part in implementing during Hollande's presidency, but he would probably endorse more liberal measures. On Europe, Macron wants more eurozone integration and closer cooperation with Germany, while acknowledging that France first needs to become a credible partner through reforms and then request more investments from Germany. He would also commit France to respecting the EU treaties and the 3% public deficit rule – a promise also made by Fillon. In contrast, the socialist Hamon plans to request a moratorium on the 3% rule and even suggested that France could ask for a renegotiation of its public debt.[5]

If there is an issue on which the non-extremist French parties converge, it is that of the need to strengthen the eurozone and further integrate economic and monetary policy. The presidential candidates however vary in the way they would go about achieving that. According to Fillon, for example, eurozone members would be in charge of this enhanced structure. This depicts a more restrained approach to deeper monetary and financial policy integration than the one favoured, for instance, by French conservative members of the European Parliament (EP).[6]

Also on trade policy, Fillon belongs to a rather conservative and protectionist camp inside Les Républicains. He strongly emphasises the necessity to adopt new rules based on the principle of strict reciprocity and considers that the negotiations for the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) should be stopped and the safeguard clauses in the EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) immediately activated, if necessary. Hamon is also clearly against TTIP and CETA, in line with the position of all French socialist MEPs who voted against the CETA on 15 February 2017 in the EP.[7] Consequently, the next French President is likely to adopt a much more protectionist policy on trade. The only exception would be if Macron is elected, but his leeway could then be limited by a legislative majority.

A President without a majority?

Macron and Le Pen's first major challenge if one of them is elected President will be to secure a majority in the legislative elections. These two candidates who are currently the most likely to qualify for the second round have to hope that their victory in the presidential elections will give a strong enough impetus to their candidates in the legislative elections, to urge voters to elect them. Unlike the presidential elections, local ties and constituency presence play an important role in the legislative contest. To date, legislative elections have always favoured traditional mainstream parties, who can generally count on well-known, established candidates. In 2012, even if Le Pen secured 17.9% of the vote in the presidential race, candidates supported by her in the legislative elections scored around 4% points less. In the end, the first-past-the-post electoral system and the 'cordon sanitaire' resulted only into two seats in parliament for the FN. The French political system is designed to boost the winner's results in order to help the formation of clear majorities and preclude the risk of instability that characterised the previous French Republic. So far, the two traditional governing parties have been able to score on average 10% points more in the legislative elections compared to the presidential one. But if neither of the two presidential candidates supported by the socialist and conservative parties, respectively, manages to reach the second round, French politics will enter uncharted territories.

Such a scenario cannot be completely ruled out at this point. The outcome of the legislative elections is supposed to mirror the results of the presidential contest and give a governing majority to the newly elected President.[8] The semi-presidential system, inspired by De Gaulle, is meant to give the main leadership role to the President but also to place him/her under the parliament's control. What will happen if the President is not supported by a majority of representatives in the National Assembly? The 'cohabitation scenario' – a configuration where the President does not enjoy the backing of a majority of members in the National Assembly, and where he has to nominate a Prime Minister in agreement with the parliament – has already occurred three times since 1958[9] but never at the beginning of a mandate. By itself, the idea of cohabitation

can be considered as betraying the spirit of the Constitution of the Fifth Republic because it *de facto* undermines the authority and reduces the powers of the President. Having it happen with a brand-new President could throw the regime into crisis due to the likely conflicting relationship between the President and Prime Minister, but also on account of the difficulties that the President would face in implementing the programme that got him/her elected.

If the regime were to endure in such a scenario, it would do so at the expense of the strength of the presidency, raising fundamental questions about the architecture and the balance of the French Constitution. In this case, building a coalition might prove essential in order to be able to govern the country. Political agreements between some political parties do exist for legislative elections but have generally consisted in a strategic *rapprochement* between one of the main parties – looking to win the elections – and a smaller counterpart – seeking to secure parliamentary representation. If this becomes necessary, political parties will be reinforced at the expense of the presidential role and political behaviours will have to be adapted to make the political system work.

Conclusion

Europe-related issues are not a central part of the campaign in the upcoming French elections. In fact, their absence from some debates of the left and right primaries became a subject in itself. This is indicative of France's lack of interest in external issues and its currently protectionist tendencies, which have led to a critical appropriation of EU topics by extremist parties.

The degree of openness of the country has emerged as the core issue in the upcoming elections. A victory of Le Pen would isolate France with potential dramatic consequences for the country and the EU. In contrast, Macron is rejecting inward-looking attitudes and would follow an opposite strategy on the European and international stage. He has been campaigning in several countries as a means of developing ties with foreign leaders (and also to profile himself as a credible President). These two completely contradictory attitudes might however be balanced by the results of the legislative elections. The vote for the parliament will determine the ability of the newly-elected President to govern the country and the composition of the majority could affect in one way or another his/her policy preferences. This majority is likely to moderate positions that so far strongly differentiate the presidential candidates, but the choice between an attitude of closure or openness will ultimately hinge on the candidate who wins the presidential race.

To some extent, a victory for Macron would reverse the current protectionist tendencies in France and open a window of opportunity for European partners willing to push cooperation further in some areas. Yet the pressure would be high and could trigger a backlash in the coming years if such a strategy does not deliver concrete results for the citizens.

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1 Stothard, Michael (2017), "Le Pen debt plan threatens massive default, say rating agencies", *Financial Times*, 9 February 2017, found at: https://www.ft.com/content/06deaa20-eed8-11e6-930f-061b01e23655, last accessed on: 13/03/2017.

2 All presidents of the French Fifth Republic – except Valéry Giscard d'Estaing between 1974 and 1981 – belonged either to the French conservative party or the Socialist Party.

3 Klimm, Leo (2017), "Macron: Merkel hat unsere Würde gerettet", *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, 1 January 2017, found at: http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/frankreich-macron-die-kanzlerin-hat-unsere-wuerde-gerettet-1.3317434, last accessed on: 12/03/2017.

4 Ivaldi, Gilles (2017), "L'économie populiste 'attrape-tout' de Marine Le Pen", *Le Monde*, 17 February 2017, found at: http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2017/02/16/l-economie-populiste-attrape-tout-de-marine-le-pen_5080505_3232.html, last accessed on: 12/03/2017.

5 Charrel, Marie (2017), "Benoît Hamon veut 'renégocier' la dette publique", *Le Monde*, 2 March 2017, found at: http://www.lemonde.fr/election-presidentielle-2017/article/2017/03/01/benoit-hamon-veut-renegocier-la-dette-publique_5087310_4854003.html, last accessed on: 12/03/2017. He subsequently corrected himself by saying that a French debt at 100% of GDP was sustainable but that his goal was the mutualisation of debt over 60% of GDP.

6 See, for example, their votes on the establishment of a budgetary capacity for the Eurozone at: http://www.votewatch.eu/en/term8-budgetary-capacity-for-the-eurozone-motion-for-resolution-vote-budg-econ-committee-resolution.html, last accessed on: 10/03/2017.

7 See the votes on the EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement at: http://www.votewatch.eu/en/term8-eu-canada-comprehensive-economic-and-trade-agreement-draft-legislative-resolution-vote-consent-conse.html, last accessed on: 10/03/2017.

8 Legislative elections always take place the month after a new President is elected. If there have been new elections during the previous presidential mandate, then the National Assembly is dissolved in order to elect a new assembly.

9 This happened during each of the 2 mandates of François Mitterrand (from 1986 to 1988 with Jacques Chirac as Prime Minister and from 1993 to 1995 with Edouard Balladur as Premier), as well as during the first mandate of Jacques Chirac (from 1997 to 2002 with Lionel Jospin as Prime Minister).

The German federal elections: the prospect of continuity and change

Fabian Zuleeg and Janis A. Emmanouilidis

German electors will cast their votes for the new composition of the Bundestag on 24 September 2017, deciding on the governing coalition and the next German Federal Chancellor (Bundeskanzler). Over recent decades, an increasing number of parties have been represented in the Bundestag. The CDU/CSU (conservative sister parties – centre right) and the SPD (social democrats – centre left) are still the two largest political parties in Germany, both currently polling at around 31-34%.[1] In the past, they were followed by the FDP (Liberals), which traditionally had been the king makers of German politics but failed to meet the 5% threshold needed to enter the Bundestag in the last federal elections in 2013.

In the 1980s, these three main parties were joined in the Bundestag by Die Grünen (The Greens; after re-unifcation re-named Bündnis 90/Die Grünen), which formed a coalition with the SPD the last time the social democrats provided the Chancellor (Gerhard Schröder, from 1998 to 2005). Since re-unification in 1990, Die Linke (The Left) has also been consistently represented in the German federal parliament. Following the upcoming federal elections in September, the list of parties in the Bundestag will probably also include the anti-migration and EU critical Alternative for Germany (AfD) (formerly anti-euro but now also extreme right/anti-migration and anti-Islam).

The composition of a more fragmented Bundestag

All seven parties are likely to get more than 5% of the vote and thus enter the Bundestag this time around, creating a politically more fragmented Bundestag and in all probability reducing the combined vote of the current governing grand coalition between the CDU/CSU and the SPD. At present, the party which is closest to potentially falling below the threshold is the FDP.[2] If the liberals failed again to make it into the Bundestag, the mathematical possibility of a coalition among the parties on the left side of the political spectrum would increase.

However, it is far from clear which party would be able to capture the most votes from the FDP. One possibility could be a strengthening of the AfD. But given internal rivalries within the party leadership over the future overall direction of the AfD and a potential polarisation of the electoral context between the CDU/CSU and the SPD, which is likely to put all smaller parties (including the AfD) under pressure at the September ballot, recent polls suggest a decline in support for the AfD, sinking to around 10% or even lower.[3] Should support for the AfD drop to a single digit in the elections, this would be seen as a blow to the populist right-wing challenge in the most populous EU member state.

But independently of how well (or not) the AfD does in the federal elections, the party will not play a role in any coalition scenario, as no other political party is willing to cooperate with this anti-establishment, right-wing extremist party. The impact of the AfD is thus mostly negative: it splits the vote, limiting the number of possible coalitions and pulls some of the rhetoric, in particular that of the CSU (the CDU's Bavarian sister party), more to the right, especially on issues related to migration.

Having seven parties in the Bundestag will make it mathematically more difficult to construct a stable coalition with an overall majority and Germany has no tradition of minority governments. With the CDU/CSU and the SPD projected to emerge as the largest parties, another repetition of the grand coalition is thus by far currently seen as the most likely outcome. Whichever of these two parties becomes the biggest and assumes the Chancellorship, the other party is expected to take on the roles of Deputy Chancellor and Foreign Minister. The Finance Minister, traditionally the third most important position in Government, with an increasingly strong say in the formulation of Germany's stance in the EU, will depend on the exact vote tally of these two parties, with a potentially even distribution in the final count increasing the chances that the position might go to the junior coalition partner.

The CDU/CSU is entering the race with the incumbent Chancellor Angela Merkel (in office since 2005) who, for a long time, had been clearly favoured to once again win the Chancellorship in another grand coalition. Although Angela Merkel had lost support both in the wider public and in parts of the CDU/CSU in the course of the migration/refugee crisis, the opposition seemed for a long time too weak to threaten her candidacy.

But the surprising nomination of the former President of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz, in January 2017 as the SPD contender (Kanzlerkandidat) and future party leader has inspired a remarkable resurgence of the SPD vote from around 22-24% to more than 30%, now rivalling for the first time in a decade the CDU/CSU for the top spot. From today's perspective, it is not inconceivable that the SPD might become the largest party, although it remains to be seen whether the high level of support the party and Martin Schulz himself enjoy at present can be sustained to the same degree all the way until the election date. But rather than making a grand coalition unlikely, a better electoral showing for the SPD compared to four years ago might dispel fears that the social democrats are being marginalised in the grand coalition, thus encouraging a perpetuation of the *status quo*.

If the CDU/CSU and the SPD are neck to neck, the new constellation might even produce innovative coalition solutions. Germany might even copy the arrangement in the European Parliament, with Chancellor Merkel succeeded half way through the term by a Chancellor Schulz – a formula the latter is all too familiar with. Admittedly, this is an unlikely scenario, but it cannot be ruled out completely.

Potential policy implications of another grand coalition

In case of another grand coalition, the parties supporting the new German government will continue to share a strong commitment to European integration, seeing the European Union as a central indispensable pillar of Germany's political and economic future. This is in line with a strong majority in the population, which continuously supports Germany's EU and euro membership.[4]

In many policy areas, the coalition would most likely maintain its current policies, which stem from compromises between the CDU/CSU and the SPD, with the CSU tending to be further to the right on the conservative spectrum, while the SPD pulls the grand coalition to the left, especially with respect to economic and social policymaking. Consequently, if the SPD does well or even claims the Chancellorship, the coalition might lean more towards the centre-left, albeit not unmitigated by the CDU/CSU's standpoint.

Concerning European policy, one should not expect any revolutionary changes, even if EU-related issues are likely to rank higher on the electoral agenda compared to four years ago. However, an enhanced role of the SPD would most likely manifest itself in a tendency to be less strict on fiscal discipline with more emphasis on (social) investment, both within Germany and with regard to other countries in the eurozone. At the same time, many German positions would not change fundamentally: a new grand coalition would continue to underline the need for all EU/euro countries to stay committed to the process of structural reforms aiming to enhance competitiveness and nobody should expect that certain long-standing taboos, like the introduction of Eurobonds, will be broken.

In other policy areas related to the EU's external action, both the CDU/CSU and the SPD are likely to push for more common action, including support for multilateralism and the global economic order, although the SPD is somewhat more reluctant on trade deals and hard defence cooperation. There is an increasing awareness in both the CDU/CSU and the SPD that Germany and Europe will have to assume more international responsibility given the high degree of geopolitical and geoeconomic insecurity following the start of the Trump administration. But although the 'Berlin republic' (Berliner Republik) has gone a long way since 1989/1990 in terms of its external civilian and military engagement, the German strategic discourse and the country's ability to engage in international peacekeeping and peacemaking operations is still limited by a long tradition of self-restraint, as well as by inadequate and inefficient defence spending.

Both coalition partners support the so-called *Energiewende*, implying a continuing emphasis on renewables and the phasing out of nuclear energy. On migration, the CDU/CSU and the SPD are likely to push for more

European solidarity and efforts aiming to limit the number of people arriving at the EU's borders to a minimum in order to keep migration flows under control. With respect to the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), one can assume that a CDU/CSU-SPD government will not be willing to compensate for Brexit-induced reductions in the next EU budget negotiations. On the contrary, a renewed grand coalition will try to make sure that German financial interests are well safeguarded in the next MFF.

Last but not least, following the British decision to withdraw from the EU, there is concern with the impact of Brexit on German industry and the overall balance of power in the Union, but this is not likely to change the fundamental position of Germany *vis-à-vis* the UK: the European project and European unity is much more important than any short-term economic considerations, and a country deciding to leave the EU cannot obtain a better deal than those which stay within the Union.

Alternative coalition governments

Apart from a grand coalition, it will be very difficult to construct another stable alliance. With a strong showing for the SPD, the parties on the left (SPD, Greens and Linke) might, in theory, be able to establish a majority coalition without the CDU/CSU. However, polling consistently indicates[5] that a majority of the German electorate, including those ready to vote for one of the three parties, do not favour a federal government based on a coalition on the left side of the political spectrum. Many voters prefer a continuation of the grand coalition.[6]

In any case, from today's perspective, the probability of a majority composed of the SPD, the Greens and Die Linke seems negligible[7] and, even if possible, it would be difficult for such a left-wing formation to agree on a coherent coalition programme, with some fundamental disagreement likely to arise around foreign policy, trade and economic policy, as well as issues related to the European Union. However, if such a potential coalition option emerges, it would provide the SPD with a stronger bargaining position *vis-à-vis* the CDU/CSU, giving it (even) more influence and better posts in a grand coalition.

On the other side of the political spectrum, the CDU/CSU is unlikely to have any other choice than a grand coalition. According to the polls, a potential alliance between the CDU/CSU and the FDP would find it almost impossible to collect the necessary votes to reach a majority in the Bundestag.[8] In addition, while on many issues, especially with respect to economic policymaking, the positions of the CDU/CSU are closer to those of the FDP than the SPD, significant tensions could arise because of the FDP's stance on the eurozone crisis, in particular in relation to Germany's support for the countries of Southern Europe, especially Greece (where the FDP is openly advocating an exit of Greece from the euro area), and the continued permissive monetary policy of the European Central Bank (ECB), also opposed by the FDP. The FDP's more restrictive position on migration and refugee issues could also mount a challenge to Chancellor Merkel, although it might find sympathy from the Bavarian CSU, which advocates a much stricter migration and refugee policy than the CDU.

Alternatively, the CDU/CSU might want to consider a coalition with the Greens. Such an alliance would have precedence at the federal-state level, but its viability in the Bundestag is in question both in terms of numbers and political content. Above all, the positions of the Greens and CSU on migration and the way of dealing with the problems of the eurozone, as well as German economic policy, are often diametrically opposed. Further clashes are likely to arise also in areas such as trade, where the Greens are much more sceptical than the CDU/CSU. At any rate, statistically, such a coalition is unlikely to have a majority, especially given that public support for the Greens has decreased substantially in recent months.[9]

In extremis, if CDU/CSU and FDP or Greens fall short of a majority, to avoid a repetition of the grand coalition, a 'Jamaica' arrangement (CDU/CSU-FDP-Greens) might become a possible option. However, in this case, all parties would need to compromise significantly on their positions in order to form and maintain such a politically complex governing alliance. In particular, the very different approaches to the governance of the eurozone, foreign, security, defence, and trade policy, as well as social and migration issues would make a 'Jamaica' coalition highly unstable, and thus rather unlikely.

Conclusions

In the end, by far the most likely outcome of the upcoming German federal elections is continuity and stability rather than any radical political change. But the formation of a new grand coalition, which seems the most likely outcome given the current outlook, would not necessarily imply more of the same. A strengthened SPD, potentially claiming the Finance Ministry, as well as an SPD chancellor with strong European credentials, or a CDU chancellor who will want to leave a positive European legacy in her last term in office (as nobody expects Angela Merkel to run again in 2021), would make a difference at both the national and European level.

From a European perspective, unless there is a major disruption to current voting trends, the German federal elections are likely to bring, at the very least, stability without significant momentum to tackle European and, indeed, global challenges. But we might also witness a reinvigorated Germany, at the heart of the European integration process, taking the lead, together with France, in a more ambitious renewal of the European Union. The latter would require, first and foremost, an agreement between Berlin and Paris, which presupposes that the new French President and the newly elected German federal government will be ready and able to overcome some of the major differences France and Germany have encountered in recent years on how to further intensify cooperation, especially among the countries sharing the same currency.

A Franco-German compromise would be the indispensable prerequisite for obtaining the support of other (key) member states in an effort to tackle some of the crises facing the EU. A more balanced grand coalition between the CDU/CSU and the SPD, combined with the entry into office of a newly elected, moderate French president, could open a political window of opportunity for fresh initiatives provided that Berlin and Paris will be ready to show the political courage required to once again enter unchartered territory at the European level.

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1 The most recent results of different polling companies show the following picture: Forschungsgruppe Wahlen (published 10 March 2017): SPD: 32%; CDU/CSU: 34%; Infratest Dimap (published 9 March 2017): SPD 31%; CDU/CSU: 32; Forsa (8 March 2017): SPD: 32%; CDU/CSU: 33%; Emnid (published 12 March 2017): SPD 33%; CDU/CSU 33%. For an overview of polling results see: http://www.wahlumfragen.org/bundestagswahl/, last accessed on: 13/03/2017.

2 Most recent polls show the FDP at: Forschungsgruppe Wahlen: 5%; Infratest Dimap: 6%; Forsa: 6%; Emnid: 6%.

3 Most recent polls show the AfD at: Forschungsgruppe Wahlen: 9%; Infratest Dimap: 11%; Forsa: 8%; Emnid: 8%.

4 See, for example, http://www.n-tv.de/ticker/Umfrage-60-Prozent-der-Deutschen-fuer-Verbleib-in-der-EU-article19690708.html, last accessed on: 10/03/2017.

5 See, for example, http://www.infratest-dimap.de/umfragen-analysen/bundesweit/umfragen/aktuell/bewertung-von-koalitionen-grosse-koalition-und-schwarz-gruen-ueberzeugt-jeden-zweiten-rot-rot-gruen-je/, last accessed on: 13/03/2017.

6 See, for example, http://www.forschungsgruppe.de/Umfragen/Politbarometer/Langzeitentwicklung_-_Themen_im_Ueberblick/Politik_I/#KoalWunsch, last accessed on: 13/03/2017.

7 Recent polls indicate that a coalition between the SPD, Bündnis90/Die Grünen and Die Linke would fail to reach a majority in the Bundestag: Forschungsgruppe Wahlen: SPD 32%; Bündnis90/Die Grünen 7%; Die Linke 8%; total: 47% ; Infratest Dimap: SPD 31%; Bündnis90/Die Grünen 8%; Die Linke 8%; total: 47%. Forsa: SPD 32%; Bündnis90/Die Grünen 8%; Die Linke 7%; total: 47%; Emnid: SPD 33%; Bündnis90/Die Grünen 7%; Die Linke 8%; total: 48%.

8 Recent polls indicate that a coalition between the CDU/CSU and the FDP would be well below a majority in the Bundestag. Forschungsgruppe Wahlen: CDU/CSU 34%; FDP 5%; total: 39%; Infratest Dimap: CDU/CSU 32%; FDP 6%; total: 38%. Forsa: CDU/CSU 33%; FDP 6%; total: 39%; Emnid: CDU/CSU 33%; FDP 6%; total: 39%.

9 In the first half of 2016, Bündnis90/Die Grünen were polling at around 12-13%. Recent polls put them at about 7-8%.

The Italian elections: much ado for more of the same?

Francesca Fabbri

The main elements of uncertainty: the electoral law and election date

It is still not clear when the next parliamentary elections in Italy will take place and under which electoral law. The 'natural conclusion' of Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni's government is in February 2018, but there is no agreement yet on whether early elections should be held or not. This uncertainty is related primarily to the electoral law: the last two reforms of the electoral law have been both subject to Constitutional Court judgments/rulings and partially declared illegitimate.[1] If there were a vote today, the elections would take place under a hybrid law, combining the two. To complicate the picture, Italy's main, governing party – the Democratic Party (PD) – is presently going through a split and the left is in a state of fragmentation and fluidity.

The electoral law that governed the last elections of 2013, the so-called *porcellum*, was declared partially illegal by the Constitutional Court in December of the same year. Consequently, one of the key tasks of the current legislature became the promulgation of a new electoral law. Matteo Renzi became Prime Minister in 2014 and proposed an electoral law, known as *italicum*, along with a Constitutional reform aimed at redesigning the format and prerogatives of the Senate. After its approval by the Parliament, a popular referendum was held in December 2016 and a majority of voters rejected the Constitutional reform, leading to Renzi's resignation. Just a few weeks later, the Constitutional Court judged unconstitutional parts of the *italicum*. In line with the Constitution, the amended *italicum* and *porcellum* are now both directly applicable to the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, respectively. This means a return to a proportional system with a nationwide electoral threshold of 3% for the Chamber of Deputies, a regional threshold of 3% per list and 8% for multi-party alliances for the Senate.[2] A majority bonus is envisaged if a party list gets more than 40% for the Chamber of Deputies, but, looking at the most recent polls, none of the main parties reaches this number.

It is widely agreed that a vote with this law and current party system will not lead to any plausible majority and thus preclude governability. For these reasons, the political forces in the parliament are expected to agree as soon as possible on a new law or harmonisation. This was echoed by the President of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella[3], who holds the power of dissolving the parliament, and specifically tasked the current legislature with the formulation of a new law or the harmonisation of the existing legislation across the two Chambers. A large number of proposals (19) are now under scrutiny in the Constitutional Affairs Committee and the discussion in the Chambers is expected to start at the end of March. Some of these proposals put forward a slight modification of the current system (for instance by lowering the majority bonus for the Chamber of Deputies or extending its model to the Senate), others aim to restore the former electoral law, legge Mattarella, that introduced the majoritarian model in Italy, while a few more outline new electoral systems. Given the balance of forces in the Constitutional Affairs Committee, it seems that the compromise will focus on the first two kinds of proposals.

Timewise, the potential options for a vote are: June, autumn or the end of the mandate (February 2018). In practice, June would be too early in the current political landscape, and Italy will be hosting the next G7 in late May. Also, this possibility seems now unfeasible, given that the PD has set the date for the election of its new Secretary on 30 April, thus an early vote would be politically very difficult for them. This makes a vote in autumn or February a more likely scenario.

However, it is possible – although unlikely – that the split of PD may turn Gentiloni's executive into a minority government and that early elections could be triggered by a failed vote of confidence on one of the future measures put before the Parliament for approval. Also, political forces of the opposition – the 5 Star Movement (M5s), the Northern League and Brothers of Italy – have been pushing for elections since the outcome of the Constitutional referendum in December 2016. Overall, a vote after September looks most probable and Renzi, who still has certain leverage on the current government, aims for elections at the earliest in autumn.[4] At the

same time, PD's splinter faction and, more generally, parties and movements on the left, will most certainly need time for regrouping and reorganising, and will be watching closely developments inside the PD. The case for later elections is made also by worries regarding the annual approval of the Budget Act[5], which is set to take place in autumn. For this reason, and for the sake of stability, some important institutional figures, such as the former President Napolitano and former Prime Minister Prodi, are advocating for the natural conclusion of the legislature, and it seems that public opinion favours this option as well.[6] Prime Minister Gentiloni also recently declared his intention to see his mandate through.

A party system struggling to adapt to the electoral law

Until February 2017, according to most recent polls, PD kept a relative majority compared to other parties at about 30-31%. Nevertheless, given the split of the PD, and taking into account the fact that a part of its leadership and related constituencies will shift to the breakaway faction (the Democrats and progressives – Dp), as well as to other centre-left parties/movements, these polls are no longer relevant. So far, the impact of the splinter group on the PD's total share of votes appears to be between 2-3%. The other party to the left of the PD, the Italian Left (SI), was projected at about 4-5%. The numbers on the left side of the political spectrum are continuously changing in light of the above-mentioned developments. However, the trend seems to be that fragmentation is leading to growing consensus. In addition, following the PD's split, the 5 Star Movement is now virtually Italy's largest party with about 28%. However, M5s too is facing problems and, according to a recent Demos & PI poll, since June 2016, the party has lost 6% points (falling from 32.3% to 26.6%).[7]

On the right-wing side, Berlusconi's Forza Italia (FI) has not recovered since its drop in 2013-2014 with polls somewhere between 12-13%. The Northern League has similar results, but for them these percentages would be quite historical, as they never secured more than 10% in elections and it is rather unlikely that they would get more now, given their extreme stances. The small, but quite vocal, far right-wing party, the Brothers of Italy, accounts for approximately 4-5%. The centrist forces, the New Centre Right (NCD), which governs with the PD, and the Union of Centre (UdC) are just above 3%. These numbers will be put to the test in the next administrative elections of 1,011 Italian municipalities that are set to take place between April and June 2017.

Table 1: Evolution of polls for Italian parties

Party	20 February 2017*	9 March 2017**
PD	29.5-30.8%	27.2-29.1%
M5s	26.6-27.2%	28.5-28.8%
FI	12.3-13.2%	11.5-12.3%
Northern League	12.8-13.4%	10.6-13.3%
Brothers of Italy	4.6-5.2%	4.6-6.7%
SI (+ Dp and CP in March)	3.7-5.2%	6.2-10.5%
NCD-UdC	3.4-3.5%	2.4-3%

* *Range of votes obtained by combining two different sources: Supermedia YouTrend, 17 February 2017, found at: http://www.youtrend.it/2017/02/17/sondaggi-supermedia-17-febbraio-scissione-pd/, last accessed on 8/03/2017 and Atlante Politico N. 62 - Demos & PI, February 2017, found at: http://www.demos.it/a01350.php, last accessed on 8/03/2017.*

** *Range of votes obtained by combining two different sources: Supermedia YouTrend, 3 March 2017, found at: http://www.youtrend.it/2017/03/03/sondaggi-supermedia-italia-francia-3-marzo/, last accessed on 8/03/2017 and Atlante Politico N. 63 - Demos & PI, March 2017, found at: http://www.demos.it/a01362.php, last accessed on 8/03/2017.*

Inter- and intra-party politics

PD has been going through an internal struggle on when and how to go to the vote. The leadership of the party decided to hold a Congress in May to elect a new Secretary as former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi resigned from that post. The Congress will determine the positioning of the party on several issues. Renzi remains the most favoured candidate in PD's internal race and that would not cause a significant shift in the party positioning. However, political prospects may change with a strong electoral showing of the party secretary of

leftist-leaning contenders: Michele Emiliano, President of the Puglia region and a potential 'secessionist', or Andrea Orlando, Minister of Justice, known as a bridge builder between different factions in the party.

In the next few weeks, the political space to the left of the PD will be reshuffled with the new movement Dp coming into play and forces resulting from PD's split joining recently-founded parties and movements. In addition to Dp and SI, the former mayor of Milan, Giuliano Pisapia, has launched a new initiative, the Progressive Camp (CP). So far, the CP maintains a dialogue with both the PD and the minority of party members leaving it. However, the electoral strength of Dp, SI and CP remains unclear.

M5s is facing political challenges and has been in the spotlight regarding the shady and messy management of Rome's town council, including the arrest of the town council's chief of staff on corruption charges. In more general terms, since its inception, M5s has had a chaotic internal organisation and issues related to its leadership. So far, however, this does not seem to have significantly affected its electoral strength.

In this context, Berlusconi's Forza Italia seeks to assume the role of balancing force. Conceivably, FI could either aim for a grand-coalition with the PS or opt for aligning with other right-wing parties, primarily the Northern League. Although traditionally an ally, in the past few years, there has been friction between the two parties, mainly related to the difficult relationship between Berlusconi and the leader of Northern League, Matteo Salvini. However, in the upcoming administrative elections, FI and the Northern League will be running together in several cities and, there is talk of a possible alliance, which would create a basis for a plausible right-wing coalition. Yet, Salvini's extreme and nationalist positioning, as well as his ambition to lead the right-wing coalition, may well put him on a collision course with Berlusconi.

Coalition options

Different coalitions can thus be envisaged, but the results could change dramatically depending on how the situation evolves after PD's split, in regard both to the electoral law and the choice of election date. At present, without a new law or a homogenisation of the two existing systems for the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, it seems that a vote would lead to great uncertainty. According to recent simulations, none of the possible coalitions would have a majority in the Chamber of Deputies with the proportional system.[8]

Until now, the most likely coalition would have built on the current grand coalition, including the PD and New Centre Right, possibly also with the participation of Berlusconi's Forza Italia. This would not significantly change the *status quo* in Italy, as different forms of grand coalitions between the Italian centre-right and centre-left parties have governed the country since 2011. Nonetheless, the outcome of the PD Congress could change this prospect, depending on the ideological positioning of the party in the aftermath of the breakup.

Another option is a wider right-wing coalition. This alliance would need at its basis a *rapprochement* of the national leaders of Forza Italia and the Northern League, which is not impossible. If the two parties manage to ally with the Brothers of Italy, according to the polls, these forces could take up to 35% of the vote, albeit not taking into account the effect that the electoral campaign might have. If the proportional system is kept, these parties would not need to run together on a list and this coalition could also take shape after the vote. These parties could agree on the issues causing tensions between them based on the balance of power resulting from the election, with one of the main bones of contention between Berlusconi and Salvini, being the name of the candidate for Prime Minister.

A strong showing of the anti-establishment parties would make it possible to form a coalition between the Northern League, the 5 Star Movement and the Brothers of Italy. This possibility is often circulated in the Italian media[9], but M5s has always said that it would not ally with any other political force. If necessary, however, such as in the case of early elections and in the absence of a clear majority, these forces could change their mind and decide to compromise.

Under a different scenario, in the (unlikely) case that the Congress of the PD elects a new Secretary to the political left of Renzi, there could be a broad coalition including most of the forces contending the elections.

Such an alliance would be reminiscent of the model of Prodi's Ulivo, stretching from the far left to the catholic centre left. Historically not very successful, this is a format that was created to counter Berlusconi, which inspired PD's creation. According to recent polls, a similar coalition could reach up to 38%.[10] That said, the political conditions for this scenario seem to be missing at the moment if Renzi manages to keep his post as PD Secretary. In addition, it is not clear whether alliances will form to the left of the PD given the haziness of the Italian archipelago of leftist parties. If those parts that split from the PD move to more leftist positions, there could be the chance of a coalition with the SI. Yet, looking at recent polls, this coalition would not be able to secure more than 10% in national elections.

Potential coalitions and European integration

The current political fluidity in Italy makes it difficult to anticipate the policy stances of different potential coalitions on European issues. Although at the national level individual parties may have clear positions on a number of topics, it is uncertain how their preferences would weigh inside different political alliances. Much will depend on the electoral law and how the party system will change as a result in the next few months.

In case of a grand coalition, the current positioning on European matters would not differ much from that of the incumbent government. The PD, FI and the former 'Popular Area' (NCD+UdC) tend to agree on issues related to European integration but problems could arise around specific policies, such as public spending, environmental protection and migration. Overall, FI is more economically liberal and socially conservative than the Democratic Party and is likely to try to shift the policies of the government to the right. However, the results of the elections would determine which side weighs more within the coalition. That said, the PD and FI have experience in cooperating with each other. Therefore, if they ally, or if the PD finds coalition partners on its side of the spectrum, the *status quo* would most likely be maintained. In general, under Renzi, Italy has taken a pro-European stance, while at the same time challenging Germany and the European Commission on fiscal and budgetary issues, as well as proposing alternatives in terms of integration and solidarity on economic and migration topics.

If a right-wing coalition between Forza Italia, the Northern league and Brothers of Italy would govern, their positioning towards Europe would also depend greatly on the balance of power within the coalition that will ensue from the elections. Forza Italia and the Northern League have rather different stances on several issues, with the Northern League being more far right and the FI more moderate. Most of all, the Northern League is nationalist and anti-European on economic issues, on the governance of the eurozone and on trade. However, the FI and Northern League have a long tradition of compromise, built on solid relations also at the local level. If the Northern League becomes the preponderant force in this coalition, it may be that Italy will take a more nationalist approach, whereas if Forza Italia wins the majority of votes, it will struggle to impose a pro-European policy on the Northern League and Brothers of Italy, though nationalism will be more mitigated in this case.

A coalition involving M5s, the Northern League and the Brothers of Italy would be very disruptive for European politics. These parties share an opposition to the euro and a generally sceptical attitude towards Brussels. However, M5s has always excluded any political alliance. On the other hand, while the Northern League and Brothers of Italy are clearly right wing and embrace nationalist and conservative stances on most issues, M5s is not openly positioned on the traditional right-left spectrum. While these forces may agree on migration and their scepticism towards the EU, an alliance with the right would probably create defections inside the M5s and diminish its popular support. Although unlikely, such a coalition would mostly focus on the exit of Italy from the eurozone[11], with little political capacity to put forward initiatives in other areas.

A left-wing coalition would be rather pro-European, as the PD would be by far its largest component. Still, if there is a rebalancing towards a more leftist positioning, there could be differences related to the governance of the eurozone and other economic issues. In fact, some on the left-wing actors are rather critical with respect to the governance of the eurozone. These positions surface especially in the case of the SI. Therefore, a coalition on the left may imply that Italy could push harder for EU economic governance reform and reinforce the stances that Renzi's government already had advanced on fiscal and budgetary policy, leading to a potential clash with Germany and the European institutions, but also possibly advancing innovative models of integration.

Conclusions

If a coalition of anti-European forces were avoided, it would not necessarily mean that Italy takes a leap forward in terms of its contribution to European integration. A win of a right-wing coalition, for instance, may also bring about equally irreconcilable nationalist positions. Chances seem to favour a preservation of the *status quo*, characterised by compromise across the political spectrum, under the guidance of the PD. All in all, given the fragmentation of the political map, the next Italian elections may lead to a scenario where no coalition is in the position to govern the country. Such political instability might be the biggest risk that the electoral outcome may pose to Europe.

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1 For the *Italicum*, the Constitutional Court rejected, for instance, a second electoral round for the Chamber of Deputies (found at: http://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/atto/corte_costituzionale/caricaDettaglioAtto/originario?atto.dataPubblicazioneGazzetta=2017-02-15&atto.codiceRedazionale=T-170035, last accessed on: 5/03/3017); for the *Porcellum*, the Court rejected three parts of the law: the majority bonus for the Chamber of Deputies not related to a minimum threshold of votes, the same for the Senate further complicated by the regional repartition of bonuses, and the single-member district mechanism.

2 "Italicum e Consultellum: due sistemi a confronto", *La Repubblica*, 25 January 2017, found at: http://www.repubblica.it/politica/2017/01/25/news/italicum_e_consultellum_se_si_votasse_oggi_come_eleggeremmo_camera_e_senato-156862673/, last accessed on: 10/03/2017.

3 "Mattarella: "Senza legge elettorale alto rischio ingovernabilità"", *La Repubblica*, 31 December 2016, found at: http://www.repubblica.it/politica/2016/12/31/news/mattarella_discorso_fine_anno_quirinale-155190647/, last accessed on: 10/03/2017.

4 "Pd, i piani di Renzi: primarie il 7 maggio e voto a settembre. Orlando si prepara alla sfida", 20 February 2017, found at: http://www.repubblica.it/politica/2017/02/20/news/pd_i_piani_di_renzi_primarie_il_7_maggio_e_voto_a_settembre_orlando_si_prepara_alla_sfida-158730424/?ref=HREA-1, last accessed on: 10/03/2017.

5 "Rischio proporzionale per la legge di bilancio", Roberto D'Alimonte, *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 26 February 2017, found at: http://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/notizie/2017-02-26/rischio-proporzionale-la-legge-bilancio-114459.shtml?uuid=AESfLZd, last accessed on: 10/03/2017.

6 Atlante Politico N. 62 - Demos & PI, February 2017, found at: http://www.demos.it/a01350.php, last accessed on: 7/03/3017.

7 *Ibid.*

8 Poll EMG Acqua for TG LA7, 27 February 2017, found at: http://tg.la7.it/sondaggi/il-sondaggio-politico-di-luned%C3%AC-27-febbraio-2017-27-02-2017-113313, last accessed on: 3/03/3017.

9 "Prove d'intesa Lega-M5s, Salvini smentisce. E Di Maio: "Nessuna alleanza"", *La Repubblica*, 23 January 2017, found at: http://www.repubblica.it/politica/2017/01/23/news/prove_d_intesa_lega-m5s_salvini_smentisce-156679149/, last accessed on: 12/03/2017.

10 Atlante Politico N. 63 - Demos & PI, March 2017, found at: http://www.demos.it/a01362.php, last accessed on: 13/03/2017.

11 In Italy, referenda on international treaties are explicitly rejected by the Constitution, therefore if these forces made it in government, decisions on the European treaties would be taken at the level of the Parliament.

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