

European governments rocked by EU election results

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European parliamentary elections held in the 25 member countries of the European Union (EU) June 10-13 were marked by record levels of voter abstention and dramatic losses for governing parties across the continent.

A total of 349 million people were eligible to vote for the 732 deputies of the European Parliament. Promoted by a number of commentators as “the biggest democratic vote after the parliamentary elections in India,” the election turned into an expression of massive popular discontent with the institutions of the EU and the various European governments.

Just 44.2 percent of those eligible to vote actually did so—the lowest figure ever for a European election. In the elections of 1979, 63 percent of voters turned out, but since then there has been a steady decline. In the last European election, held in 1999, voter participation was slightly under 50 percent.

The biggest factor in the record abstention rate in this election was the response of voters in the Eastern European countries that joined the EU on May 1 of this year. In Poland, which has by far the largest population of all the new member countries, only one in five of the electorate turned out. In the Czech Republic turnout was less than 30 percent, and in Hungary under 40 percent. Voter participation was also at record low levels in long-standing EU member countries such as Germany and France.

Some commentators have claimed that the low turnout was a result of a lack of information and of disinterest in the elections. However, such explanations merely gloss over the real forces at work.

Many Europeans did not vote because they quite correctly regard EU institutions as undemocratic bodies committed to serving the interests of the most powerful business lobbies. In this respect, the low turnout expresses both the sharp social polarisation in Europe and the growing alienation of the mass of the population from the entire political establishment.

These social and political phenomena were also demonstrated by the success of those groups and parties that centred their campaigns on criticism of the EU, or rejection of the EU altogether. In the Netherlands, for example, the organisation recently founded by a former EU official, Paul van Buitenen, won enough votes to immediately enter the European Parliament. In the 1990s, Van Buitenen uncovered a corruption scandal in the EU Commission and was subsequently fired from his job.

In similar fashion, the new list led by European Deputy Hans-Peter Martin, who campaigned against bribery and the excessive expense accounts of EU bureaucrats, won 14 percent of the vote in Austria. Right-wing parties opposed to the EU were also able to win considerable support in Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Great Britain.

Although it took different forms in different countries, the general pattern revealed in the election results was voter discontent with incumbent governments. In particular, social democratic parties that have governed for a number of years and pursued a policy of dismantling social programs suffered devastating losses.

The ruling German Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Britain’s Labour Party recorded their worst ever election results. In Poland, the

ruling Democratic Left (SLD) alliance received less than ten percent of the vote. This means that in Poland, only one out of every fifty people eligible to vote cast a ballot in favour of the government party!

Parties of the right also suffered at the hands of the voters. Conservative parties registered considerable losses in France, Italy, Ireland, Denmark, Austria and the Netherlands. This reflected both popular anger over the break-up of welfare state programs and opposition to the war against Iraq.

In particular, losses recorded by Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi’s party and Tony Blair’s Labour Party in Britain were, to a large extent, bound up with popular opposition to the war. In Spain, the Socialist Party, which achieved a surprise victory in Spanish national elections three months ago by appealing to popular opposition to the war, was able to maintain its share of the vote.

With governing parties of both the official left and right suffering losses, sections of the media are speaking of an “electoral warning.” At issue, however, is not a temporary warning. The decline of so-called “people’s parties,” which for a long period could rely on a relatively stable base of support, has been underway for some time. The dramatic erosion of their social base of support has been brought into sharp relief by this month’s European elections.

The decline itself is an expression of the profound gulf dividing the broad masses of the population from the entire bourgeois political establishment. All of the traditional institutions and mechanisms with which the European bourgeoisie has ruled in the post-war period are undergoing a severe crisis.

Germany

With 21.4 percent of the vote, the SPD, led by Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, suffered its worst ever national election result. Formerly, the party’s worst result—28.8 percent—was recorded in national elections in 1953, at a point when conservative leader Konrad Adenauer stood at the height of his popularity.

In comparison to the last European election, in which the SPD also registered a disappointing result, the party lost 9.2 percent of its support. Compared to the last German national election, held in 2002, the party lost 17 percent.

In the state election in Thuringia, held at the same time as the European elections, support for the SPD collapsed, and the party recorded just 14.5 percent—its worst ever result in a state election. The SPD actually polled ten percent less than the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), which emerged as the second largest party in the state, after the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

With 48.7 percent, the CDU was regarded the clear winner of the European elections in Germany. But, in fact, the CDU received 4.2

percent less than its total in the European elections of 1999.

The German Green Party was able to profit from the losses of other parties and nearly double its tally to 11.9 percent. The Greens were able to largely dissociate themselves from their own role in government and rely on the support of well-to-do middle-class layers in the big cities.

The “free market” liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) also increased its share of the vote, and with 6.1 percent was able once again to enter the European Parliament. The PDS, which in the 2002 national elections failed to win the five percent minimum for representation in the German parliament, slightly increased its percentage in the European elections, recording a similar total to that of the FDP.

The losses suffered by the SPD were mainly due to abstention by huge numbers of its traditional supporters, who have been hard hit by the government’s programme of social cuts, spelled out in its Agenda 2010. According to one opinion poll, 11 million citizens who voted for the SPD in the German national elections did not vote this time round, while a total of 800,000 are estimated to have switched to the CDU.

None of the smaller parties taking part in the elections registered more than two percent of the vote. With a national total of 25,824, the German Socialist Equality Party (PSG) was able to more than double the figure it received in the European elections of 1994.

Great Britain

Results from Scotland and Northern Ireland have not yet been announced, but it is nevertheless clear that the elections in Britain delivered a decisive rebuff to the Labour Party government. Turnout was 39 percent, up by 2 percent from 1999 (primarily due to the introduction of postal ballots in most of the north), but still below the EU average.

Labour won just 23 percent of the vote, down 6 percent, recording its lowest share of the vote since 1910, only four years after the party was formed. Labour’s result in the European elections was even worse than its disastrous performance in last Thursday’s local elections. But the Tories did not benefit from Labour’s woes. They won only 27 percent of the vote, 10 percent down from the last elections and their lowest share of any national vote since 1832.

The main beneficiary of voter disaffection was the anti-European Union UK Independence Party (UKIP), which took third place with a total of 16.8 percent, doubling its vote from 1999. It quadrupled the number of its European Parliament members from three to 12, and in the East Midlands former TV presenter Kilroy-Silk, disgraced for his anti-Arab comments, came within 0.3 percent of beating the Tories for second place. In the Southwest and Southeast, the UKIP also finished in second place behind the Tories.

The *Guardian* commented that this was “the first election in which the two major parties struggled to win a majority of votes; the first in which parties not represented in the House of Commons took more than 25 percent of the total; and the first election in British history in which the ‘winning’ party got less than a third of the votes.”

The UKIP’s vote came mainly at the expense of the Tories, but its success creates major difficulties for the government in regard to its policy towards the EU, and will have the effect of shifting the entire spectrum of official politics to the right. The UKIP won many votes from people who are not even supportive of withdrawal from the EU, but who merely wished to register a protest against the policies of the Labour government.

The UKIP’s vote does not mean that voter disaffection with Labour took a predominantly right-wing form. Quite the opposite. The Liberal Democrats, who campaigned on an anti-Iraq war platform and portray themselves as being to the left of Labour on social issues, increased their

share of the vote by two points, to 15 percent.

The Greens retained their two European Parliament seats by winning 6 percent of the vote. George Galloway’s leftist Respect Unity Coalition won some 1.8 percent of the vote nationally, but closer to 5 percent of the vote in London, where it received over 90,000 votes—still short of the vote needed to obtain a seat in the EU Parliament.

The far-right British National Party’s vote increased by 1 percent nationally, to 5 percent.

There was also a plethora of protest candidates, many focusing on antiwar and “traditional Labour” themes. In aggregate, the non-UKIP minor party vote was almost 19 percent. Combining the votes for these minor parties with that of the UKIP, over a third of those voting deserted all three major parties—Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democratic.

France

In France, the governing party (UMP) of President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin received just 16.6 percent of the vote. The UMP was founded by Chirac in the spring of 2002 as a means of uniting a divided right wing behind the figure of the incumbent president. The UMP has an absolute majority in the country’s National Assembly.

After the European election, the right wing in France is as splintered as ever. The “free market” liberal UDF, which refused to become part of the UMP, was able to win 12 percent of the vote. Together, two additional right-wing parties—the MPF led by Philippe de Villiers and the RPF of Charles Pasqua—won a total of 8.4 percent. As opposed to the UMP and UDF, the two latter parties are opponents of the EU. The extreme-right National Front of Jean-Marie Le Pen won 10 percent. In regional elections three months ago the National Front recorded 15 percent.

The main beneficiary of the election was the Socialist Party, which obtained nearly 30 percent—an increase of 8 percent over the party’s total for the last European elections. The French Greens lost ground somewhat and received 7 percent, while the Communist Party recorded 5.8 percent. Those parties that had formed the “coalition of the left” under Lionel Jospin from 1997 to 2002—the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, the Greens and the Radicals—received a total of 42.4 percent, significantly more than the total of 37.7 percent obtained by the right-wing bourgeois parties (excluding the National Front).

The alliance of “radical left” parties—Lutte Ouvrière and Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire—received only 2.6 percent of the vote, a lower total than they recorded in the previous two European elections, in which they obtained over 5 percent of the vote and were able to enter the European parliament. The two parties’ votes also declined from the 4.9 percent they obtained in regional elections three months ago.

Italy

In Italy, voter turnout was relatively high, at 70 percent, but the governing party led by Prime Minister Berlusconi received just 20.5 percent. This is 9 percent less than the party received in parliamentary elections in 2001 and 5 percent less than the party’s total for the last European elections. Berlusconi, who stood as the leading candidate for his party, had counted on receiving at least 25 percent of the vote. The result is seen as a severe personal defeat for him.

Partners in Berlusconi’s right-wing coalition were able to profit somewhat from his own losses. The National Alliance won 11 percent,

and the Christian Democratic UDC won 5.6 percent. Another member of the coalition, the Northern League, received just 5 percent. In total, the camp of governing parties won 43 percent.

The main opposition, the Olive Tree Alliance, of which European Commission President Romano Prodi is a leading member, was unable to make headway, and received just 30 percent of the vote, similar to its result in previous elections. Taken together, the combined votes for opposition parties exceeded by two percent the total for the governing coalition parties.

If the result were translated into a national parliamentary election, the Communist Refoundation Party, which received 6 percent of the vote in the current European elections, would play a leading role. In the past, Communist Refoundation has repeatedly supported centre-left governments in parliament and is now contemplating participation in a future centre-left coalition.

Spain

In Spain, the Socialist Party (PSOE) maintained its standing following its unexpected victory in national elections on March 14th. With 43.3 percent of the vote, the party recorded a total slightly higher than its March result. The conservative Peoples Party (PP), defeated in March, was able to increase its share of the vote by two percent and finished just two points behind the PSOE. The turnout of 46 percent, however, was an all-time low.

Losses were recorded by Spain's smaller parties. The United Left, which emerged from the Spanish Communist Party, won just 4.2 percent and lost two of its four seats in the European Parliament.

Poland

Under conditions of a very low turnout, Poland's conservative Citizen's Platform emerged as the strongest party in the election. The Citizen's Platform and other conservative opposition parties, which support the EU in principle but demand a strong defence of Polish "national interests," together won 40 percent of the vote.

Two right-wing, anti-EU parties won some 30 percent of the vote. The nationalist Catholic League of Polish Families (LPR) received 17 percent, and Samoobrona (Self Defence), led by the right-wing populist Andrzej Lepper, won 12 percent. Prior to the elections, pollsters had predicted a far higher percentage for Lepper.

The governing SLD received less than 10 percent and a split off from the SLD, Polish Social Democracy, received 5 percent.

Observers have predicted that the result will do nothing to dampen the political crisis raging in the country. Marek Belka, the candidate nominated by Polish President Alexander Kwasniewski for the post of prime minister, must appear once again before the Polish Parliament to win confirmation. Belka failed to receive the necessary majority after the first parliamentary vote some weeks ago. Following the SLD's disastrous showing in these latest elections, Belka's chances for success the second time round are rated at virtually nil.





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