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doi: 10.1016/j.electstud.2005.03.003

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# European elections in eight new EU member states

Daunis Auers\*

*EuroFaculty, University of Latvia, Raina Bulvaris 19, Riga LV-1586, Latvia*

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## 1. Background

Elections to the European Parliament in June 2004 were of particular significance in being the first to involve the eight new member states from East-Central Europe, following their accession to the European Union on May 1st 2004. Accession had been scheduled for May precisely to facilitate their participation in the European elections.

The new formula for allocating seats in the European Parliament, created in the Nice Treaty, entailed a reduced number of seats for the established member states (except Germany, previously under-represented) to accommodate the new members. The total number of seats increased from 626 to 732<sup>1</sup>; 151 seats were contested in East-Central Europe.

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\* Tel.: +371 961 5228; fax: +371 782 0260.

E-mail address: [dauers@eurofaculty.lv](mailto:dauers@eurofaculty.lv).

<sup>1</sup> Under the pre-Nice formula there would have been 788 deputies, the same number of deputies and observers from the new member states working in the parliament for several months prior to the election.

There was real optimism that the new member states would provide the European Parliament with a new impetus. The relatively high turnouts in the 2003 national referendums on accession to the European Union in the eight East-Central European states (averaging 59%, and ranging from 45.6% in Hungary to 72.5% in Latvia), as well as the sense of historic occasion – a ‘return to’ or ‘unification of’ Europe’ – encouraged expectations that these elections would reverse the overall decline in turnout since the first European elections in 1979. Secondly, that the status of the new European parliamentarians would give the legislature increased prestige. The first hope proved to be false, but the second has been partially fulfilled.

## **2. Contenders**

Even in the pre-enlargement European Union there was little in the way of Europe-wide political parties, nor any salient ‘European’ issues to capture the interest of the electorates. Moreover, the parties of East-Central Europe have had a mixed impact on the effort to create truly European parties. On the one hand, parties which claim links to established European parties (Christian Democrats, Social Democrats, Liberals) have embraced the perceived legitimacy that close contacts with their western counterparts bring. On the other hand, these parties often share only names and symbols, not policies, with West European parties. For example, Social Democratic parties in East-Central Europe are typically less ‘progressive’ on issues such as gender, sexuality, and the environment. Yet again, the East-Central European party systems are volatile, and far more open to new, often populist parties which are less policy oriented, and thus more unpredictable and difficult to align in wider groupings.

Most of the national parties campaigning in the European elections had already aligned themselves with one of the European Parliament’s political groups. However, the groups do not have the characteristics of supranational parties. They are not involved in candidate recruitment, which is handled by the national parties, nor are they traditionally involved in coordinating their campaigning. Rather, and despite the presence of observers from the East-Central European countries in the pre-enlargement European Parliament, campaigns were managed at the local level and primarily revolved around national issues. The exception was the Green Party, which had founded a European-level party, the European Greens. However, not one single Green deputy was elected in East-Central Europe. Other parties maintained close contacts with their partner parties (particularly the Social Democrats), but there was no attempt to coordinate their campaigns at the supranational level.

The parties themselves gave the European elections a significantly lower priority than national elections. Latvia provides a good case in point, as one of the few new member states that still has private financing of political parties. In the 2002 parliamentary election, three leading political parties – Peoples’ Party, Latvia’s First Party, and Latvia’s Way – spent 1,493,753 Lats (2.1 million euro) on campaigning (Cigane, 2003) but their combined spending in the 2004 European Parliament election campaign was just 103,178 Lats (150,000 euro), about 7% of the 2002 total.

This pattern was repeated across all eight countries, giving the elections a generally low key ‘feel’, so failed to mobilize the electorate to any significant extent.

Even so, the quality of the candidates standing for election in East-Central Europe was striking. In particular, a number of MEP candidates were politicians in their prime. Among those elected were former Prime Ministers, such as Jerzy Buzek (Poland), Alojze Peterle (Slovenia), and Guntars Krasts (Latvia), and a string of ex-Ministers, most notably Toomas Ilves (Estonia) and two Polish Foreign Ministers, Dariusz Rosati and Bronislaw Geremek (who was the ALDE group’s candidate for President of the European Parliament). Such high profile figures stood for the European Parliament for three major reasons. First, the European Parliament promised greater financial benefits than national parliaments, due to the generous allowances that the European Parliament pays MEPS in addition to their basic salaries. Second, MEPs have a far higher profile in East-Central Europe than in Western Europe, because the media pay a great deal of attention to goings on in Brussels and Strasbourg. Moreover, EU accession has been such a long-held, and central, national priority that the media gravitates towards covering European issues. Third, as the new member states have no experienced ‘old hands’ in the European Parliament, the parties – and the voters – seem to have felt compelled to put forward mature politicians capable of competently representing their interests. Certainly, voters resisted the urge to elect the frivolous; for example, neither the Czech adult film star Dolly Buster (Independent Initiative, formerly known as Independent Erotic Initiative) nor the Estonian super-model Carmen Kass (*Res Publica*, the largest party in the Estonian parliament) were elected.

### 3. Issues

Going into the election, three issues directly concerned the future development of the European Union, and had a very clear bearing on the new member states. The prospective EU membership of Turkey was particularly contentious. Opinion polls revealed that the public was firmly opposed to Turkey’s membership, primarily due to widespread suspicion of Turkey in terms of its barely European location, its Muslim population, and its low level of economic development. Secondly, the proposed European constitution aroused controversy in seeming to change the nature of the EU that the new member states had agreed to join. Moreover, it undermined the influence of East-Central Europe’s largest country – Poland – granted under the Nice Treaty. Thirdly, the 2007–2013 financial perspective, already being discussed in the Council of Ministers, contained proposals from the largest and wealthiest member states for capping EU spending at 1% of the EU’s annual GDP (currently 1.24%). This was recognized as having not only a significant impact on the level of cohesion and structural funds that the new member states could expect in the medium term, but had been one of the major points in selling accession to the public in the 2003 referendums.

In the event, only the European Constitutional Treaty proved to be a contentious issue, and then only in Poland and Slovakia, the two countries with the lowest

turnout (Kurpas et al., 2004). Both the Constitutional Treaty and the financial perspective raised largely technocratic issues that are not readily converted into campaigning issues to capture the public's interest. The obvious exception was Poland, which (together with Spain) stood to lose much of its influence under the Constitutional Treaty. Moreover, elections in East-Central Europe revolve around corruption scandals, populism, and charismatic personalities as much as policy and party programmes. In this respect, the European Parliament elections proved to be rather different to national polls. The campaigns were largely focused around domestic issues such as immigration, and economic policy, rather than political scandals. However, this reflects the low-key secondary nature of the elections rather than a new approach to party campaigning.

#### 4. Election results

Voter turnout was well below that in the older member states, and the number of wasted votes much higher.<sup>2</sup> The mean average turnout in the new member states was just 31.2%, less than half the average turnout at the most recent national election (and 23 percentage points lower than in the 2003 national referendums on EU accession). The low turnout in the new member states pushed the average turnout among all EU member states to a new low of 45.7%. Only in Lithuania was turnout above the EU-25 average, due largely to a highly contentious first round of the presidential election (following the impeachment of the previous incumbent, Rolandas Paksas) held on the same day. See Table 1.

The low turnout can be largely explained by the lack of mobilization; the parties just did not prioritize the European elections. Moreover, most voters view the European Parliament as a remote and inscrutable institution (Scully, 2003, p. 175), and are not familiar with its activities. Domestic factors also influenced turnout. For example, electors in Slovakia (at 17%, the lowest turnout in the EU) were probably suffering from voter fatigue, having already voted in two rounds of presidential elections and a void referendum earlier in the year.<sup>3</sup> Another explanation of the low turnout was offered by newly elected MEP Krzysztof Bobinski (Civic Platform) who argued that Poles were simply not used to the idea of participating in Europe: 'Poland still views the EU as something that gives Poland instructions and money. They don't see themselves as taking part in European affairs and being co-deciders. So they didn't see the elections as exercising their democratic right on the European scale' (BBC News, 14 July 2004).

According to Rose (2004), the 'euro gap' between turnout at national and European elections is not due to a general apathy towards politics in the 'new' Europe – the gap in turnout at national elections between old and new EU member states is much smaller – but is due to lower levels of trust in government and

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<sup>2</sup> The average of wasted votes in the new member states was 17% but was just 5.4% in the 15 established member states.

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, taking into account parliamentary and municipal elections, and another referendum, electors in Slovakia had voted six times in total since September 2002.

Table 1

Results of European Parliament elections in eight East-Central European States, June 2004

National Parties (Turnout European Parliament election; Turnout General Election)	Vote European Parliament 2004 %	Vote Most General Election %	Nos. MEP 2004	Party affiliation in the European Parliament <sup>a</sup>
Czech Republic (28.3%; 58.0%)		14–15/06/02 <sup>b</sup>		
Obcanska Demokratická Strana (ODS)	30.0	24.5	9	EPP-ED
Komunistická Strana Čech a Morava (KSCM)	20.3	18.5	6	EUL/NGL
Sdruzeni Nezavislych/Evropsti Demokrata (SN/ED)	11.0	—	3	EPP-ED
*Krest'anská a demokratické unie- Československá strana lidova (KDU-CSL)	9.6	14.3 <sup>c</sup>	2	EPP-ED
*Česká strana sociálně demokratická (CSSD)	8.8	30.2	2	PES
Nezavisli	8.2	—	2	IND/DEM (1) & NA (1)
Estonia (26.8%; 58.2%)		2/3/2003		
Sotsiaaldemokraatlik Erakond (SDE)	36.8	—	3	PES
Eesti Keskerakond (K)	17.5	25.4	1	ALDE
*Eesti Reformierakond (ER)	12.2	17.7	1	ALDE
Isamaaliit (IL)	10.5	7.3	1	EPP-ED
Hungary (38.5%; 70.5%)		7/4/2002		
Fidesz - Magyar Polgari Part (FIDESZ- MPP)	47.4	41.1 <sup>d</sup>	12	EPP-ED
*Magyar Szocialista Part (MSZP)	34.3	42.1	9	PES
*Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége (SZDSZ)	7.7	5.5	2	ALDE
Magyar Demokrata Forum (MDF)	5.3	41.1	1	EPP-ED
Latvia (41.3%; 71.5%)		5/10/2002		
Tevzeme un Brīvība/Latvijas Nacionālā Neatkarības Kustība (TB/LNNK)	29.8	5.4	4	UEN
Jaunais Laiks (JL)	19.7	23.9	2	EPP-ED
Par Cilvēktiesībām Vienota Latvija (PCTVL)	10.7	18.9	1	EG-EFA
*Tautas Partija (TP)	6.6	16.7	1	EPP-ED
Latvijas Cels (LC)	6.5	4.9	1	ALDE
Lithuania (48.4%; 55.9%)		8/10/2000 <sup>c</sup>		
Darbo Partija (DP)	30.2	—	5	ALDE
*Lietuvos Socialdemokratai Partija (LSDP)	14.4	31.1	2	PES
Tėvynės Sąjungos - Lietuvos Konservatoriai (TS)	12.6	8.6	2	EPP-ED
Liberalų ir Centro Sąjunga (LCS)	11.2	17.2	2	ALDE
Valstiečių ir Naujosios Demokratijos Partija Sąjunga (VNDPS)	7.4	—	1	UEN
Liberalų Demokratai Partija (LDP)	6.8	—	1	UEN
Poland (20.9%; 46.3%)		23/9/2001		
Platforma Obywatelska (PO)	24.0	12.7	15	EPP-ED

(continued on next page)

Table 1 (continued)

National Parties (Turnout European Parliament election; Turnout General Election)	Vote European Parliament 2004 %	Vote Most General Election %	Nos. MEP 2004	Party affiliation in the European Parliament <sup>a</sup>
Liga Polskich Rodzin (LPR)	15.9	7.9	10	IND/DEM
Prawo i Sprawiedliwosc (PiS)	12.7	9.5	7	UEN
Samoobrona (SO)	10.8	10.2	6	NA
*Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej & Unia Pracy (SLD-UP)	9.3	41.0	5	PES
Unia Wolnisci (UW)	7.3	3.1	4	ALDE
Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe (PSL)	6.3	9.0	4	EPP-ED
Socjaldemokracja Polski (SdPI)	5.3	—	3	PES
Slovakia (17.0%; 70.0%)		20–21/9/2002		
*Slovenska Demokraticka a Krestanska Unia (SDKU)	17.1	15.1	3	EPP-ED
Hnutie za Demokratické Slovensko (LS-HZDS)	17.0	19.5	3	NA
Strana Smer - Tretia Cesta (SMER/SDL)	16.9	13.5	3	PES
*Kresťansko-demokratické hnutie (KDH)	16.2	8.3	3	EPP-ED
Strana Mad'arskiej Koalicie - Magyar Koalicio Partja (SMK)	13.2	11.2	2	EPP-ED
Slovenia (28.3%; 69.9%)		24/20/2000		
Nova Slovenija (NSi)	23.6	8.7	2	EPP-ED
*Liberalna Demokracija Slovenije (LDS)	21.9	36.3	2	ALDE
Slovenska Demokratska Stranka (SDS)	17.7	—	2	EPP-ED
Združena Lista Socialnih Demokratov (ZLSD)	14.2	12.1	1	PES

Source: <http://www.elections2004.eu.int>.

\* Denotes governing party. KEY: EPP-ED, European People's Party-European Democrats; PES, Party of European Socialists; ALDE, Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe; EG/EFA, European Greens/European Free Alliance; EUL/NGL, European United Left – Nordic Green Left; UEN, Union for a Europe of Nations; EDD, Europe of Democracies and Diversities; NA., not affiliated. Source: <http://www.elections2004.eu.int>; <http://www.electionworld.org>.

<sup>a</sup> Stated affiliation as at 15 July 2004.

<sup>b</sup> The Chamber of Representatives (lower house) elections.

<sup>c</sup> In coalition with Unie Svobody-Democraticke Unie.

<sup>d</sup> FIDESZ-MPP and MDF campaigned as a coalition in the 2002 parliamentary elections winning 41.1% of the vote. FIDESZ-MPP took 164 of the coalitions 188 seats. MDF held the balance.

<sup>e</sup> Multi-member constituency results.

political parties. Certainly, those who did vote tended to cast their ballots against incumbent parties; see Table 1. In this respect, the European election results in the new member states are broadly comparable to those in the established member states (Adshead and Hill, 2005). Governing parties in all the new member states, with the partial exception of Slovakia,<sup>4</sup> fared badly. And even in Slovakia, Prime Minister

<sup>4</sup> In Slovakia, a presidential election in April 2004 had already seen a protest vote go against the ruling party.

Mikulas Dzurinda's party, the Christian and Democratic Union, only managed to tie with two other parties at around 17% of the vote. In Poland, the ruling Socialist Party came in fifth with 9.3% of the vote (compared with 41% in the previous national election); in Hungary, the ruling Socialist Party lost heavily to the opposition conservative *Fidesz*; in the Czech Republic, the ruling Socialists lost to the right-wing Civic Democrats (leading to the government's collapse after the election); and in Latvia, only one of the three ruling coalition parties (Peoples' Party) managed to win a single seat. Rather, anti-European populist parties fared well across the region, particularly in Poland where the League of Polish Families came second and the Self-Defense of the Polish Republic came fourth. The zealously nationalist opposition For Fatherland and Freedom/Latvian National Independence Movement party won four of the nine Latvian seats, despite barely passing the 5% threshold in the 2002 parliamentary election.

The general pattern of voting against incumbent parties suggests that economic factors were to blame. Despite achieving EU and NATO membership in recent years, as well as the comparatively high economic growth rates in the region over the last 5–10 years, the new member states (with the exception of Slovenia) still lag well behind the older EU member states in terms of economic development.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the de-regulated, liberal economies of the region mean that there are large groups of disaffected 'losers' from the economic reforms. These floating voters easily switch political allegiance and are prepared to vote against an incumbent government that fails to provide the rapid level of economic development expected (and often rashly promised in populist campaigning).

## 5. Effects

The election results ensured that the centre-right European People's Party (EPP) group remained the largest in the European Parliament, followed by the Socialists (PSE). The centrist European Liberal Democrats group was replaced by the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), hoping that it would attract more deputies away from the EPP. However, it failed to significantly alter the balance of power in the legislature. Except for the Green/European Free Alliance (EFA) group, all political groupings in the European Parliament have representatives from the new member states. With eurosceptic parties faring particularly well in the new member states, Polish MEPs make up more than one-quarter of the eurosceptic Independence/Democracy Group (which replaced the eurosceptic Europe of Democracies and Diversities). MEPs from the new member states also make up a majority of members in the right-wing Union for Europe of the Nations (UEN) group, which, while not as rabidly eurosceptic as the Independence/Democracy group, consists of nationalist parties that tend to be suspicious of European federalism.

The European Parliament approved the new Commission President, José Manuel Barroso, former Prime Minister of Portugal, but demanded changes in the

<sup>5</sup> Slovenia has a GDP comparable to Portugal and Greece.

composition of the new European Commission. Consequently, Barroso dropped the nominated Latvian commissioner (and Speaker in Latvia's national parliament), Ingrida Udre, who was mired in a party finance scandal in Latvia,<sup>6</sup> and reshuffling the Hungarian appointment (Laszlo Kovacs) to another portfolio.<sup>7</sup> The new member states are represented on all 23 Committees of the European Parliament, which are the most important part of the parliament's working life. They have even been handed the Chairmanship of a number of Committees, including the influential Budget Committee (Janusz Lewandowski, Poland) and the Budgetary Control Committee (Szabolcs Fazakas, Hungary).

The impact of the elections on domestic politics level was muted, reflecting the low importance that politicians and public alike attached to the poll. The exception was the Czech Republic, where Vladimir Spidla resigned as prime minister and chairman of the ruling Social Democrats after only narrowly winning the backing of the party's ruling executive following the party's fifth place in the European vote (8.8% and two seats). Spidla had the compensation of becoming the Czech European Commissioner a few months later.

The impact of the elections in the East-Central European member states on the European Parliament has been mixed. Disappointment about low turnout has been tempered by the heavyweight deputies elected. While voting patterns were broadly similar to patterns in the established member states, one effect of the European elections in the new member states has been to strengthen the populist, eurosceptic wing of the parliament; another has been to marginalize the Greens, whose influence had been building steadily since 1979. Only in the long term, however, will the impact that the new member states have on the character of the parliament, and other EU institutions, be evident.

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<sup>6</sup> Ingrida Udre was also accused of being an opportunistic eurosceptic.

<sup>7</sup> Barroso also dropped Italy's nominee, Rocco Buttiglione.