

More Unity than Diversity

The European Parliament after the elections

Piotr Maciej Kaczyński

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The 2009 European elections present European decision-makers with two main messages. First, the turnout was the lowest in the history of the EU. Forty-three percent does not wholly undermine the legitimacy of the European project, but it sounds an alarm bell that action needs to be taken to reverse the 30-year trend. More importantly, the party balance has shifted radically towards the conservative parties. This result may, and probably should impact the way the Parliament takes decisions, especially since the geographical distribution of the election results was more unified than ever before in the history of Europe.

The elections have proven once again that there are very few trans-European political actors and none of them that run for election is successful. Libertas.eu, Newsropeans and the other formations that tried to campaign on pan-European platforms all failed this time, like their predecessors failed before them. None of the large political families, such as the European People's Party, the Party of European Socialists, or the European Liberals grouped within the ELDR/ALDE tried to capture public attention. Elections remain confined to national contexts and are won and lost by national political actors. This, however, does not prevent the general public from sending out a unified message to European leaders, however they are organised. This is what happened in the 2009 European elections.

First, the turnout pattern shows that there was a greater cohesion (an increase of 14%) between the six largest member states.¹ In 2004 72% of Italians and 21% of Poles voted; this year 66% of Italians and 25% of Poles went to the polls. The turnout in France, Spain, Germany and the UK was between 34% and 46%.

Second, all six nations took the *same political decision* in their national political contexts. The member parties of the EPP-ED won in these six member states for the first time in the history of direct elections to the European Parliament. In 2004, the conservative parties won in three of those member states; left-wing parties carried the other three. Not only did the centre-right win in all the six most populated nations in the most recent elections, their results were also more

¹ Cohesion is measured by a change in the standard deviation of turnout based on the results of 2004 and 2009 European elections in the six largest EU member states. Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain and Poland together represent two thirds of European voters and 58% of MEPs come from these states.

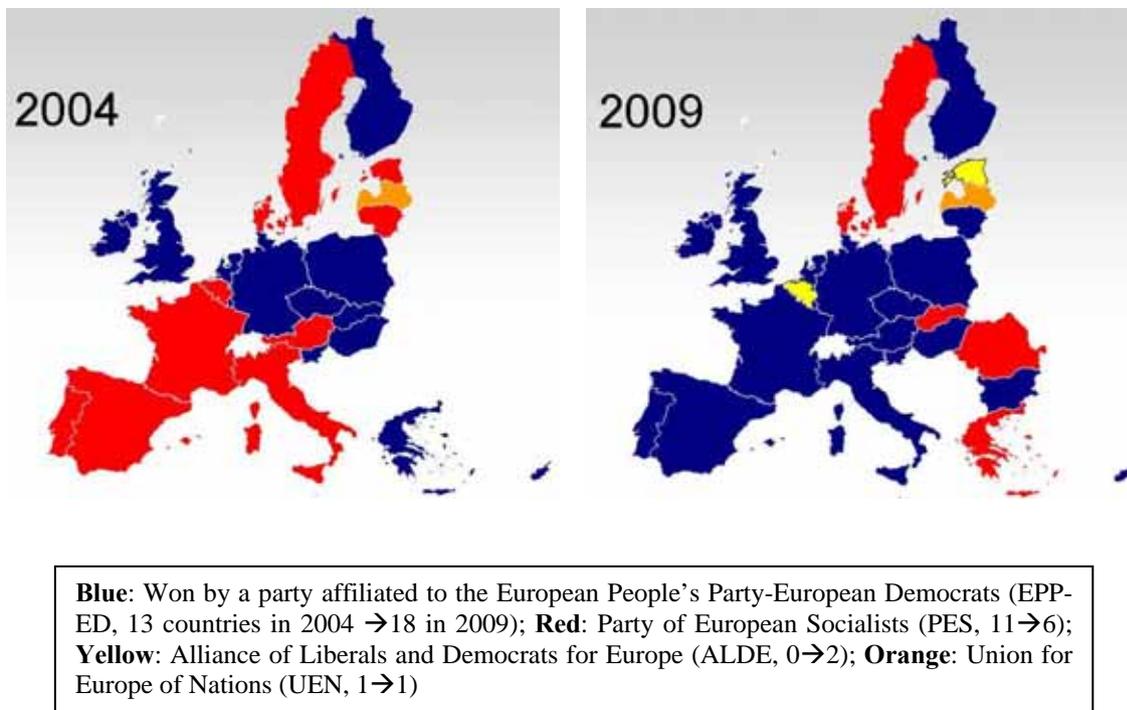
Piotr Maciej Kaczyński is a Research Fellow at the Centre for European Policy Studies.

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cohesive (an increase of 37%). At the same time the member parties of the European Socialists (PES) also recorded more unified results (an increase of 16%). In 2004 the left-wing parties won in France, Italy and Spain, were second in Germany and the UK, and 5th in Poland. This time in all countries they came 2nd or 3rd (in the UK and Poland).

Figure.1 National winners in European Parliament elections according to political grouping



The 7th June results give a new legitimacy to the centre-right majority in the Parliament. In the past, the domination of the European People's Party-European Democrats (EPP-ED) group could challenge the conservative-socialist (ad-hoc) coalition, as we saw over the past decade. Three hundred or so parliamentarians of the former EPP-ED group could easily pick and choose a more convenient majority with the Socialists (about 180 MEPs) or the Liberals (about 80 MEPs). Therefore, in choosing the new European Commission or the new European Parliament president, they could arrange a comfortable majority with the Liberal group and bypass the Socialists altogether.

More importantly, the issue of the legitimacy of conservative (rather than grand coalition) choices has been removed as the national party members of the EPP-ED group won in 18 member states, including the six largest nations. It was not legitimate (or possible) in 2004 to elect a conservative-dominated Commission, as the electorates of France, Italy, Spain and many smaller nations gave priority to Social-Democratic parties. In 2009 this problem has been averted in a concerted vote by the European public.

There are two footnotes to add to the above-mentioned scenario, however. First, the European People's Party did not win in *all* EU-27 member states. Yet in any democracy one cannot expect too many unanimous votes. In 1984 in the US, the states of California, Texas and New York all supported the same presidential candidate. The last time all US states supported the same candidate was in 1820, when President James Monroe ran unopposed.

Second, there is one precondition for any shift of European politics from a grand coalition-minded approach towards a conservative-led majority. The large EPP-ED group would need to remain *united*. At this stage, the decision to exit this group has been taken by the British Conservatives and the Czech Civic Democracy Party (ODS) along with a few other fringe parties, but in the new group (called the European Conservatives and Reformists, ECR) they will surely be unable to maintain the same level of political impact as from within the EPP-ED.

In the previous Parliament the British Tories coordinated the work of the entire conservative group in two key committees: Internal Market and Environment, while an ODS parliamentarian chaired the Environment committee. Even with both parties leaving, the EPP still remains the largest and most influential grouping in the Parliament; the British and Czech politicians have thereby chosen to marginalise themselves in the chamber. Within the EPP-ED the British Conservatives would have had the right to nominate two Committee Chairpersons; within ECR group they will probably only have one Chairperson. Their decision to leave the group has little political impact on the EPP position in the chamber, but it weakens the Liberal group and strengthens the Socialist group (since the only two-party majority can be guaranteed by a coalition of EPP and PES). It will, however, have a significant impact on the policy choices the EPP makes. Without the British and the Czech members, the EPP will be more pro-integrationist, less liberal market-oriented and is more likely to reach consensus on most issues.

To sum up, in one sense the elections of June 2009 delivered an unexpected result. In a situation where there were simultaneous elections in all EU member states, and national campaigns were run by national actors, the message sent out by the peoples of Europe is clear: they trust the conservative politicians to lead the way out of the crisis, regardless of whether they already hold offices nationally (i.e. in France, Italy or Poland), or whether they are in opposition (i.e. in the UK and Spain). If these trends continue in years to come, it may mean that on the 7th June we witnessed the emergence of a European ‘political public’ – when people in their national contexts, asked by national politicians, give a pan-European answer.