

The European elections in Central and Eastern EU states illustrate that the rise of Euroscepticism was far from uniform across Europe

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The key story to emerge from the European elections in countries like France and the UK was the rise of Euroscepticism, but does this narrative apply to all countries across Europe? **Tim Haughton** and **Tereza Novotna** present an analysis of the elections in four Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries: Croatia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia. They write that while there has been a tendency to regard CEE states as distinct from those in Western Europe, this perspective is largely outdated and analyses of EU-wide political trends should pay as much attention to smaller states in the East as they do to larger states in the West. When adopting this perspective it is apparent that the rise in Euroscepticism was not a Europe-wide trend, but rather confined to individual countries.



The success of UKIP and the *Front National* has dominated political discussion since the European Parliament (EP) election results were announced on Sunday night. But despite the lessons to learn from the performance of the nationalists and Europhobes in France and the United Kingdom, drawing on a research trip to Croatia, Slovenia, Slovakia and the Czech Republic we suggest there are arguably more significant lessons to draw from the experiences of countries further away from the media spotlight. The Table below shows the election results for the four countries.



Table: 2014 European Parliament election results in Croatia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia

- [Croatia](#)
- [Czech Republic](#)
- [Slovakia](#)
- [Slovenia](#)

Party	Parliamentary group	Vote share (%)	Seats
Croatian Democratic Union Coalition (HDZ / HSS)	EPP	41.4	5
Croatian Democratic Union Coalition (HSP AS)	ECR	-	1
Kukuriku Coalition (SDP)	S&D	29.9	3
Kukuriku Coalition (HNS)	ALDE	-	1
Croatian Sustainable Development (ORaH)	Greens/EFA	9.4	1

Note: Table compiled by EUROPP, not the authors. Parliamentary groups may change subject to negotiations for the 2014-2019 Parliament – see [here](#) for an explanation of these groups. Only parties which won a seat are shown. The Croatian Democratic Union Coalition is a coalition of several parties, some of which sit in different groups in the European Parliament. As a result the combined vote share for the coalition is shown, but the seats are separated into the relevant parties. The same is true for the Kukuriku Coalition. For more information

on the parties, see: [Croatian Democratic Union \(HDZ\)](#); [Croatian Peasant Party \(HSS\)](#); [Croatian Party of Rights dr. Ante Starčević \(HSP AS\)](#); [Social Democratic Party of Croatia \(SDP\)](#); [Croatian People's Party – Liberal Democrats \(HNS\)](#); [Croatian Sustainable Development \(ORaH\)](#).

<i>Party</i>	<i>Parliamentary group</i>	<i>Vote share (%)</i>	<i>Seats</i>
ANO 2011	ALDE	16.1	4
TOP 09 / Mayors and Independents (STAN)	EPP	16	4
Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD)	S&D	14.2	4
Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia	GUE-NGL	11	3
Christian Democrats (KDU–ČSL)	EPP	10	3
Civic Democratic Party (ODS)	ECR	7.7	2
Party of Free Citizens (Svobodni)	NI	5.2	1

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<i>Party</i>	<i>Parliamentary group</i>	<i>Vote share (%)</i>	<i>Seats</i>
Smer-SD	S&D	24.1	4
Christian Democratic Movement (KDH)	EPP	13.2	2
Slovak Democratic and Christian Union – Democratic Party (SDKÚ – DS)	EPP	7.8	2
Ordinary People (OL'aNO)	ECR	7.5	1
NOVA	ECR	6.8	1
Freedom and Solidarity (SaS)	ALDE	6.7	1
Party of the Hungarian Community	EPP	6.5	1
MOST-HID	EPP	5.8	1

Note: Table compiled by EUROPP, not the authors. Parliamentary groups may change subject to negotiations for the 2014-2019 Parliament – see [here](#) for an explanation of these groups. Only parties which won a seat are shown. NOVA ran as part of a coalition, but was the only party from this coalition to win a seat. For more information on these parties, see: [Smer-SD](#); [Christian Democratic Movement \(KDH\)](#); [Slovak Democratic and Christian Union – Democratic Party \(SDKÚ – DS\)](#); [Ordinary People \(OL'aNO\)](#); [Freedom and Solidarity \(SaS\)](#); [Party of the Hungarian Community](#); [MOST-HID](#),

<i>Party</i>	<i>Parliamentary group</i>	<i>Vote share (%)</i>	<i>Seats</i>
Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS)	EPP	24.9	3
New Slovenia – Slovenian People’s Party	EPP	16.6	2
List Verjamem (List ‘I believe’)	NI	10.5	1
Democratic Party of Pensioners of Slovenia (DeSUS)	NI	8.1	1
Social Democrats (SD)	S&D	8	1
Positive Slovenia (PS)	ALDE	6.6	0

Note: Table compiled by EUOPP, not the authors. Parliamentary groups may change subject to negotiations for the 2014-2019 Parliament – see [here](#) for an explanation of these groups. **New Slovenia** and the **Slovenian People’s Party** ran as a coalition. For more information on the other parties, see: **Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS)**; **Democratic Party of Pensioners of Slovenia (DeSUS)**; **Social Democrats (SD)**; **Positive Slovenia (PS)**.

Lesson 1: Campaigning matters

When Slovakia and the Czech Republic were mentioned in coverage of the EP elections, it was largely to record their dismal turnout, the lowest among all EU Member States. Slovakia mustered just 13 per cent whereas the Czech Republic fared little better with just over 18 per cent. Commentators were quick to link the woeful participation to a lack of interest. Slovakia’s turnout did owe much to voter fatigue thanks to two rounds of presidential and regional [elections](#) in recent months. And yet, there is something more fundamental at play.

Walking around Bratislava, Brno or Zagreb in the past fortnight you might have been forgiven for thinking, ‘election, what election?’ Few citizens seem to have been actively courted for their vote. True, campaigning is more than just billboards or standing in public places distributing leaflets. Indeed, the tools of modern technology can help mobilise the masses, but Facebook, Twitter and the array of on-line tools are more effective at mobilising younger, urban and more partisan voters: they don’t galvanise the vast mass of voters. It may sound simplistic, almost banal, to assert that campaigning matters, but in politics, not everything is complicated. If politicians don’t invest time and resources in active face-to-face campaigning turnout will remain low.

When parties put in effort into their campaign the results were striking. Admittedly not making much use of European themes, but rather by mobilising around domestic issues, the embattled former Prime Minister Janez Jansa’s Slovenian Democratic Party was the clear winner of the EP election in Slovenia garnering a quarter of the vote.

Lesson 2: We have not witnessed a wave of Euroscepticism sweeping across Europe

As Czech Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka was keen to assert on election night, the three most successful parties from both the government and opposition – ANO, TOP 09 and his own Social Democrats – are all pro-European parties. True, there were some notable successes for Eurosceptic parties. In Slovakia, Richard Sulík’s Freedom and Solidarity party (SaS), whose critical stance on the Greek eurobailout brought down Iveta Radičová’s government in 2011, won 6.7 per cent of the vote and a seat. Equally, another free market critic of the EU, Petr Mach’s Svobodni (‘The Free’) also won a seat thanks to its 5.2 per cent in the Czech Republic. But these were exceptions rather than the rule.

Critical voices were raised in both Slovakia and Slovenia about aspects of European integration. In the case of the latter, Igor Lukšič of Slovenia’s centre-left Social Democrats and Violeta Tomić of the less moderate United Left

criticised some developments in the EU, but the target of their ire was more the policies of austerity than the EU as such. Even the leader of the Slovene Nationalist Party, Zmago Jelinčič Plemeniti, who once spent most of an hour long interview with one of this post's authors lambasting the EU, did not attack the European Union in his party political broadcast, but rather castigated Slovene representatives in Brussels for not doing anything for their country.

The lack of a strong Eurosceptic discourse in the Czech Republic is perhaps the most striking. The once powerful player of Czech politics, the Civic Democratic Party (ODS), did pluck Eurosceptic heartstrings and its billboards showed its leading candidate Jan Zahradil proclaiming the party was 'for the [Czech] crown, but against the euro'. But ODS is now just a bit part player on the Czech party scene. The party's founder and former leader Vaclav Klaus known for his relentless criticism of the EU, particularly during his ten years as Czech President (2003-2013), did much to frame the debate in the Czech Republic in Eurosceptic terms when he was the resident of Prague Castle. Indeed, the change in discourse in the Czech Republic may owe something to the waning influence of Europe's once most prominent Eurosceptic in the country.

On election night, the leader of the winning party, ANO, Andrej Babiš, remarked that perhaps voters needed to be reminded of things the EU has brought to Czech citizens, particularly access to the internal market and free movement. These advantages of EU membership, he claimed, Czechs had perhaps begun to take for granted. Indeed, a poll on Czech television on the eve of the election showed that 49 per cent of respondents felt the EU had no important impact (either negative or positive) on their lives.

Lesson 3: Timing within the electoral cycle matters

The results in Slovakia and Croatia could be explained in simple terms: a vote against the incumbent. In Croatia Prime Minister Zoran Milanović's *Kukuriku* coalition which had garnered over 40 per cent in parliamentary elections in 2011, won just under 30 per cent in the EP elections. No surprise for the Croatian premier given the unremittingly bad economic news and a succession of scandals which have bedeviled his government. The main rival of Milanović's Social Democrats, the Croatian Democratic Union and its allies won over 40 per cent.

Moreover, the 24.1 per cent won by Prime Minister Robert Fico's *Smer-Socialna demokracia* (Smer-SD) was by some margin larger than for all of the other parties in Slovakia, but it amounted to a sizeable drop in support from his triumph in the general election two years ago when the party won 44.4 per cent of the vote and a majority of the seats in parliament. Fico's aura of invincibility had slipped in recent months due to his defeat in the country's [presidential elections](#). But more significantly, Smer-SD is at the helm of a single party government facing difficult policy choices and unable this time (as opposed to 2006-10 when it was last in power) to shift the focus of blame onto corrupt and incompetent coalition partners.

For the Czech Republic it wasn't a case of mid-term blues. Indeed, Czechs went to the polls recently, in the autumn last year, and the resultant government came into power just a few months ago. The vote for two of the parties of the newly-formed government, ANO and the Christian Democrats, held up well, although support for the main party of the government, the Social Democrats, did drop markedly from just over 20 per cent to just over 14 per cent. Nonetheless, the combined support for the governing coalition parties only dropped from 45.9 per cent to 40.3 per cent.

The timing of the EP elections vis-à-vis parliamentary elections also mattered in Slovenia, but in a different way. Prime Minister Alenka Bratusek submitted her resignation (and thereby the resignation of her government) earlier this month ushering in a period of uncertainty. With early elections expected soon, the EP elections felt like a [dress rehearsal](#) for the subsequent general election.

Lesson 4: EP elections offer a test of novelty and virility

Elections to the European Parliament offer new parties an opportunity to prove their worth and build up momentum. With more of an eye on the forthcoming parliamentary elections, one of the new entrants in Slovenia *Verjamem* ('I

believe') won 10.5 per cent of the vote and one seat in the EP. Led by the former President of the Court of Auditors, Igor Soltes, *Verjamem*'s appeal is rooted in a novelty and anti-corruption ticket with a desire in the words of one of the party's leading figures to make Slovenia 'the world leader in the quality of life'.

In Croatia, one of the most eye-catching results was the success of Orah ('walnut'). Capitalising on the current government's woes, particularly its lacklustre management of the economy and a series of corruption scandals, Orah (whose full name translates as Sustainable Development for Croatia) is led by a former government minister, Mirela Holy, who fell out with Prime Minister Milanović. The party mixes an anti-establishment novelty appeal with a 'green' agenda reminiscent of the more market friendly appeals used by greens in Estonia. Thanks to their success at the EP ballot box, both *Verjamem* and Orah now look set to be important players in their countries' next general election.

Amongst the political cognoscenti in Bratislava there has been much discussion of the fortunes of a new party in the process of being formed, Siet ('network') led by one of the challengers in the presidential elections, Radoslav Procházka. The party was not formed in time for the EP elections, but polls suggest it would perform well if general elections took place tomorrow (they are not due until 2016). The EP elections, therefore, offered an opportunity for the existing parties, particularly other young parties the chance to prove their virility and their continuing relevance. Nova (which means new), Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLaNO) and the party which carried the novelty and expertise banner in the 2010 elections, Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), all performed well enough to cross the five percentage threshold and win a seat (winning between 6.5 and 7.5 per cent of the vote).

In a phenomenon observed by in a [recent paper](#) one of us co-authored, new parties in Central and Eastern Europe based around the appeals of novelty and expertise tend to lose their popularity quickly. The success of Nova, OLaNO and SaS on Sunday will prolong their lives, but having lost the mantle of novelty, their challenge is to use achievements at the EP elections as a springboard for future success or at least as a way of gaining a foothold on the slippery slope of Slovak party politics.

Lesson 5: Central and Eastern Europe is no longer so different

Perhaps the point which the EP elections highlight more than any other is how much the motors and breaks of the party systems in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) resemble the developments in Western Europe. Indeed, what used to mark out CEE as different, such as the communist past, the exit from communism and trials and tribulations of post-communist transition, are [no longer](#) the drivers of politics in CEE and we'd argue haven't been for some time. Whilst it may not be (quite) the case in the words of [Kevin Deegan-Krause](#), that 'Slovakia is everywhere', political scientists wishing to understand what is happening in party politics in Europe would be well-advised to spend as much time looking at the smaller states of the East than the larger states in the West.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Feature image: Prague, Credit: Pawel Moravec (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

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About the author

Tim Haughton – *University of Birmingham*

Tim Haughton is Reader (Associate Professor) in European Politics at the University of Birmingham and the co-editor of the *Journal of Common Market Studies Annual Review of the European Union* .



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Tereza Novotna – *Universite Libre de Bruxelles*

Tereza Novotna is a fellow at Universite Libre de Bruxelles and the author of *Negotiating the Accession: How Germany Unified and the EU Enlarged* (Palgrave, forthcoming).



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