

From membership referendums to European elections

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The wave of referendums which was organised in the eight countries of Central Europe to ratify their membership of the European Union is a fascinating subject for research. This is, in fact, almost the first time that an almost identical question has been asked to the electors of eight different states within a period of less than one year. As we shall attempt to illustrate, this phenomenon raises important questions on the use of referendums in our societies and facilitates comparison. We then proceed to update the information by setting it alongside the results of the European elections in June 2004 and the referendums on membership of the European Union organised in 2003. Did these referendums foreshadow the broad trends identified the first time the new member states had an opportunity to elect European representatives?

The rising number of referendums, including the new rounds organised in the eight Central European states to ratify the European Constitution, calls for serious consideration of the referendum question. What part does the referendum play in our modern representative democracies? How do we explain the increase in the use of the referendum in the decision-making process in the European states? What is the situation elsewhere in the world? When and why was the referendum decided upon as a way of making decisions? Is it possible to make comparisons? Can explanatory models be isolated? Do states which use referendums share common political and legislative features?

There are many questions to be answered, but not so many have clear answers, partly because of the scope of the questions and partly because of the lack of genuinely comparative research undertaken in recent years on the subject. The literature ¹ has mainly focused on national cases or direct democracy, but even where the work covers high quality information on referendum procedures, comparison is seldom made ². If the number of referendums has soared in recent decades ³, rising in Europe from

20 between 1951 and 1970, to 82 between 1971 and 1990 and 130 between 1991 and 2000, research has not yet drawn sufficient attention to the significant complexities involved.

A debate taking place outside of academia has focused on the advantages and disadvantages of the referendum ⁴ as a political instrument in a democracy. In an article in the journal *Pouvoirs* ⁵, A. Ranney sums up the traditional arguments in favour of and against the referendum. First of all, he reminds us that the referendum is to some extent a third choice lying between the most extremist points of view of the *participatory school* and the representative school: "Referendum supporters believe that representative government could take over some of the virtues of direct democracy by allowing the people themselves, under certain conditions, to confirm, reject or have a direct effect on the drafting of laws" ⁶. For this group, the use of the referendum would have a number of advantages: the major advantage would be to increase the legitimacy of a political decision and increase electoral participation. We should stress, however, that research has invalidated this idea.

We might add to these traditional arguments the fact that a referendum may popularise some discussions and help raising their political profile. Some referendums on European questions, like that on the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty in France in 1992, are examples of this. Once again, the question must be asked as to whether it is not the prior politicisation of European questions, regarding which there is no consensus in some states (France, Sweden, and Denmark for example), which makes for the breadth of the political debate on the occasion of a referendum. It must nevertheless be accepted that a huge democratic debate takes place in these countries during these Europe-focused referendums.

A number of arguments are raised by the opposite camp: "First of all, according to them, ordinary people possess neither the necessary analytical qualities nor the requisite information to make wise decisions; secondly, the decisions made by elected representatives imply that account has been taken of the preferences and the merging of the legitimate interests of a number of groups for the purpose of devising measures which will give these groups a part of what they aspire to; thirdly, decisions made by representatives are more likely to protect minority interests; and, finally, by encouraging elected representatives to avoid controversial questions by giving them back to the voters, referendums weaken the prestige and authority of the representatives and of representative governments" ⁷.

We could also add that the current political situation places a lot of weight on the choice of those electors who might be more tempted to censure those who ask questions rather than those who attempt to answer them; and that a referendum drastically simplifies some questions, offering only two possible solutions to what are often highly complex issues.

The debate does not cover only the benefits of the referendum. It should be borne in mind that a number of authoritarian regimes, including the former peoples' democracies, have used referendums either to claim legitimacy or to raise support for the regime.

A swift listing of the many types of referendum in existence could be made. The outcome may be optional or obligatory. Referendums may arise from popular demand

or decided upon or offered by local, regional or national authorities. They may be held at the local, regional or national level. Participation may be mandatory or not. And a comment should be made as to the huge area of application of referendums. They may range from constitutional or institutional changes, ethical matters or changes to the law through to important or strictly local controversies. And further different varieties have been proposed ⁸.

Questions should also be asked about the reasons for resorting to a referendum and the effects they have on national political life, political structures, and political parties ⁹. There are good reasons for Laurence Morel's question: "Can a referendum act as an effective remedy to the representational crisis of which it is nowadays a symptom?" ¹⁰. Answering this question would require a thorough comparative study highlighting the common causes for the organisation of referendums in the various states. And such a study would still leave a need for an analysis of the various effects referendums have in each national political system. Since they have their own characteristics and dynamics, their effects could only be specific to the state in question.

And a final observation is that the process of building Europe gains legitimacy in some states by the constant use of the referendum. This dynamic could be seen in even greater depth by looking at the emergence of a successive wave of European referendums (membership of CEEC [Central and Eastern European Countries], ratification of the Constitution), organised in no small number of states which could give rise to positive or negative domino effects. This context also reveals clear external evidence which should be analysed. There are indeed a large number of questions awaiting for answers.

While this study does not pretend to provide answers, it does attempt to contribute some awareness and useful analysis to the general understanding of the function of referendums in our societies. And it should certainly contribute to the debate. The fact that eight referendums have been held in different states on the same subject, in the light of known common historical characteristics and the same process of European integration over a short time period, should facilitate making comparisons.

The question of why all the Central European states decided to hold a referendum on membership of the European Union should also be raised. The fact is that not all of the new members held a referendum as a matter of course ¹¹. On the occasion of the recent enlargement, Cyprus, for both internal and external reasons, decided not to hold one, and this would appear not to be the first time. And, when the Southern European countries (Spain, Portugal, Greece) joined, no referendum was organised on that occasion, either.

Governments in Central Europe seem to have felt that this "back to Europe" move had to be ratified by "democratic motivation". Political parties and elected representatives often seem too discredited and distant from the cares of the people to take responsibility for such a heavy, thoroughgoing move regarding the future of the country. It also appeared to mark the end of a time when membership of Western political, economic and security organisations (OECD, IMF, NATO, EU, etc.) were the main priorities of all governments in office, whatever their political stripe.

It is also the case that some constitutions, born of democratic enthusiasm, support or supported the holding of referendums. Some Central European states were no strangers to referendums, whatever significant differences there may have been between them.

*Number of referendums held in the CEE countries
after the collapse of peoples' democracy regimes
(not counting referendums on membership of the European Union)* ¹²

Estonia	2	Hungary	2
Latvia	3	Lithuania	17
Poland	6	Slovakia	7
Slovenia	6	Czech Republic	0

It is, however, interesting to notice how these referendums appeared as a matter of political opportunity for the governments in office. Membership of NATO did not give rise to such a wave of referendums and the decision-makers in Czechoslovakia were not tempted to consult the people regarding the division of their country, a split about which no mention was made in the programmes of the recently elected parliamentary parties ¹³.

Historically speaking, as a symbol of membership of the European Union, this final stage of “back to Europe” could only be ratified by the people directly. Notice that quite a general consensus would come into being in Central Europe in respect of these referendums for both the reasons set out above and also for internal political reasons. The governments hope to gain considerable electoral advantage from a “yes” vote and membership of the European Community. A pro-Europe opposition was able to demonstrate its sense of responsibility while criticising the government’s weakness in its negotiations with Brussels. “No” supporters were able to mobilise, take advantage of the social cost of the reforms under way, clarify their identity and have one last chance to destroy the integration of the old peoples’ democracies into the European Union.

What are the main trends which can be identified from a horizontal reading of the referendums?

Firstly, it should be borne in mind that membership of Western structures (Council of Europe, IMF, NATO, European Union) was the major aim of all governments in office after 1989. The totality of the economic and social policies in place was aiming at “back to Europe”, and it was in support of this move that the 1989 “revolutions” took place.

Secondly, these referendums were held in order to bring about a domino effect. Countries assumed to be most pro-European were to vote first, thus dragging the more hesitant along behind them. This ideal scenario was to produce negative effects very quickly. It rapidly became apparent that the question would not be so much to win a majority of the electors to support membership, but rather to persuade a majority of electors to turn out to take part in the vote. Three states (Slovakia, Poland and Latvia) needed a turnout of at least 50%. In Hungary, a politically stable, pro-European country, in April 2003 the voter threshold of 50% participation was not reached.

This fact had no effect on the country itself, but did give rise to a strong feeling of unease elsewhere. The Hungary vote marked a new stage in the wave of referendums. Henceforth governments would place much more emphasis on getting people to take part in the polls.

The problem arose because of the low level of politicisation of the populace. How could you get the voters to vote in some of the states when all surveys gave an overwhelming victory to the “yes” camp? Governments everywhere opted for a “soft” campaign avoiding excessive politicisation of the population and a division of the country – which they thought would play into the hands of their opponents – but, by doing this, they made motivation to participate difficult. For this reason, an impressive range of measures was set in place to ease and encourage voting.

A second feature of this wave of referendums was the political and ideological weakness of the “no” camp. Even in those states where it could have capitalised on significant political feeling, the “no” camp failed to appear as a credible economic and political alternative anywhere. They were unable to produce any plausible plan whereby they could remain outside the Union. The weakness and splintering of the “no” group did not aid the victory of the “yes” factor, but it did reduce the politicisation of the debate and hence motivation.

In most cases the political parties supporting “no” were organisations which did not expect to be represented in government. And, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, they took their places along with the “yes” group.

The strong ambiguity of the situation is obvious. On the one hand it looked to the overwhelming majority of the political and social elites that membership was the only choice on offer. This was clear even for eurosceptic parties like the ODS or some organisations on the Polish right wing which were highly critical of the building of Europe, but where the electorate was thoroughly European, and which felt obliged to back membership. But on the other hand the strength of the “yes” factor had to be very careful about misreading enthusiasm for membership.

As it happened, turnout was average or low and many “yes” supporters voted that way with a great deal of hesitation and a lack of other choices. The dynamic which was an integral part of each referendum made for a “yes” vote.

Observers of the European construction process among the fifteen often underestimated these realities and took a biased view of the results of the membership referendums. Also of interest was how alike were the various anti-membership electorates in the different candidate states. This was also true of the electorates among the fifteen who opposed European enlargement. Hence a sociological convergence could be identified at the level of the 25.

It should be noted, however, that the European divide rarely runs across Central European political parties¹⁴ as is the case in Scandinavia, the UK or France.

As we shall see, the results of these referendums foreshadowed some broad trends in the elections for the European Parliament in June 2004.

1. The 2004 European elections in the Central European countries¹⁵

This was a historical election, since it was the first in which the populations of the ten new member states, their memberships barely a few weeks old, took part. The

enlargement took on its first political reality. We intend to present here, first of all, the general political context in which the election took place, and then to analyse the results in each of the Member States in order to compare the broad trends emerging therefrom. Three large conclusions were drawn by observers and the European media in this first election in an enlarged Europe: abstention, the eurosceptic vote in the ten new Member States of the European Union, and the protest vote against the parties in power. We would like to show how this needs to be qualified and explained. The vote in the Central European countries is more complex¹⁶ and the results should be fitted into the wider context of national electoral politics¹⁷.

The political context

It should first be understood that the 2004 European elections took place in Central Europe against a background of considerable political instability. With the exception of Hungary and Estonia, all states were experiencing again a period of uncertainty and questioning of political equilibrium. Since 1993, party politics was becoming increasingly stable with a decrease in the number of parties represented in parliament and reduced internal fluidity. The participation of the same party organisation in the various elections and the establishment of close relationships with the European party federations were also their dominant features. But for some time the situation appeared to be changing yet again. It is too early to determine whether this was the result of the final seating in of the process of democratic consolidation or of deeper movements, but it must be said that the large majority of the countries in the region were experiencing significant political changes and crises before the European elections. Clearly, economic difficulties are no stranger in this atmosphere. The economic crisis which affected the entire Europe was also operating in the economies of these states. Furthermore, in order to abide by the outcome of the negotiations with the European Union, the new members were obliged to implement economic policies which had important and unpopular social impact.

Hence, in Latvia, after a lengthy political crisis, a difficult agreement was reached to appoint a new Green Prime Minister who was swiftly to be attacked by parties of both left and right for not having settled the minorities and educational reform questions¹⁸. In Lithuania, after months of political crises and twists and turns, parliamentary enquiries and political and institutional uncertainty, the parliament voted in April for no less than the dismissal of President Paksas. The President of the parliament covered the intervening two months, time to organise a new presidential election which took place on June 13, the same day as the European elections. In Poland, the Prime Minister, L. Miller, faced with the extreme unpopularity of his now minority government, announced his resignation the day after his country became member of the European Union. The final months of his government were marked by various corruption scandals, economic difficulties and schisms within his party. The SLD, the major party in power, also splintered. Polls gave it no more than scores close to the electoral threshold of 5%. The very existence of the party was in doubt. The press held that the party would vanish from the elections, and this was a party which had won 41% in the last legislative elections in September 2001. In Slovakia, in April, Ivan Gasparovic won the presidential election against the former Prime

Minister, Vladimir Meciar. The second round of the presidential election thus opposed two populist candidates, and the candidate for the governing coalition suffered a symbolically significant defeat. This also demonstrated the unpopularity of the ultra-liberal policy of the government in power. In the Czech Republic, Vaclav Klaus, often described as a eurosceptic, who defined himself as a “Eurorealist”, owed his election as President of the Republic to votes from parliamentarians from the Bohemian and Moravian communist party and to the fact that MPs and senators who were members of the governing coalition failed to abide by the discipline of the vote. The barely majority government staunchly supported joining Europe, but the opposition – made up of a group from the right wing, the Civic Democratic party and a slightly reformed Communist party – was still at least hesitant about joining Europe. The pro-Europeans were obliged to carry on governing together for want of an alternative. In Slovenia, a number of ministers resigned some time before the elections.

2. The results of the European elections

We shall look at the European elections from two different and complementary viewpoints, firstly the broad national trends and secondly the results for large parliamentary groups within the European Parliament.

A. National trends

Before swiftly reviewing the most significant results recorded in the European elections of June 2004 in each Central European state, we must emphasise the differences between the party backgrounds and the political scenarios in the former peoples’ democracies. There are indeed some common trends, but today each state has its own political existence coloured by its own national history, by the type of communist regime, by the form of transition to democracy and by the economic and social situation. Political balances are not alike, relationships of strength differ, and the issues on the political agenda are not the same. The existence of ethnic minorities and the momentum of the national question thus drive the political and party debate in different ways.

1. Estonia

The parties comprising the governing coalition were soundly defeated, since they won only one seat out of six for the reform Party. The three opposition parties shared the remaining five seats. The election campaign barely touched on European matters. The question of protecting national identity in general and the language in particular was the new basis for debate. The general euroscepticism seemed to be driven by a fear of being swallowed up in a large political and economic grouping in which Estonia would make itself heard only with the greatest difficulty. The low turnout in the elections (26.8%) was therefore due not only to a lack of interest, but also to a lack of motivation.

2. *Hungary*

Abstention was also considerable since participation only reached 54.4%, but these figures must be compared with the 73.5% turnout for the legislative election in 2002.

The campaign for the European elections tuned mainly on the balance sheet of the government in power. The governing social democrats suffered a defeat resulting from the economic and social problems the country was undergoing. With 34.31% of the votes and nine seats, they were considerably outclassed by FIDESZ, on the right, which won 47.4% and twelve seats. Only two other parties would be represented in the European Parliament: the SZDSZ (liberal, with two seats), and the MDF (one seat). This confirms the stabilisation of the Hungarian party panorama, since these are the same four parties represented in the national parliament. Note that no anti-European party or party of the extreme right gained significant numbers.

3. *Latvia*

The European elections confirmed the fragility and splintering of the party system. Since independence, Latvia has experienced considerable governmental instability and few parties managed to last for long. Sometimes they form around a new personality, sometimes around an economic network. The campaign was marked by traditional internal issues: the protection of the national identity, the position of the large Russian minority (30%), the fight against corruption, and the future of the incumbent government. European matters were hardly touched upon, with Europe appearing as a distant power threatening both identity and national culture. Turnout for the June 2004 election was 41.2%, and 71.5% for the legislative elections of October 2002. The parties in the ruling coalition were soundly defeated since only one of them managed to win one seat out of nine, while the opposition nationalist parties were to share the other eight seats. The party with most votes, the Conservative Union for Nation and Liberty (LNNK), could be seen as eurosceptic.

4. *Lithuania*

This was one of the Central European countries with the highest turnout rate, 48.3%. This turnout, however, was a result of the fact that the poll took place on the same day as the presidential election, which made it of secondary importance. The election witnessed the emergence of a new political organisation, the Labour Party, run by the Russian millionaire Victor Uspaskich. This populist leftist movement, presenting itself as the defender of the losers in the changeover, won 30.13% of the votes and five seats of the thirteen allocated to Lithuania¹⁹. This meant that the Lithuanian party scenario was turned upside down. It should be noted, however, that the representatives elected in this grouping took their seats in the European Parliament within the Alliance of Democrats and Liberals for Europe faction. For historical reasons euroscepticism in this country is not as powerful as in the two other Baltic States.

These elections thus ran counter to the outcome of the presidential election, representing a protest against the political elites who organised the democratic and economic changeover at the end of the nineties.

5. *Poland*

Turnout was particularly low, only reaching some 20.9%. These elections revealed a number of facts. While the balance of power may have fluctuated widely in recent years, the organisations which won seats in the European Parliament were the same as those present in the Diet of Warsaw.

These elections saw a sound defeat for the ruling SLD (Social Democrats) who won only 9.35% of the votes and five seats. The major opposition party, the Civic Platform (PO), was the main victor in this election. Poland also had the largest numbers of votes for the eurosceptic and populist parties. The low turnout doubtlessly weakened the power of these organisations, who have sometimes found it hard to motivate their voters. There was also a higher turnout in urban areas, generally pro-European, than the rural areas or crisis areas. The disappointing vote from the Samoobrona populist list and the success of the Catholic pro-Europeans, the anti-Europeans and the far right League of Polish Families (LPR) is also noteworthy.

6. *Czech Republic*

Another low turnout (28.3%). The ruling pro-European coalition was castigated, although to a different degree. While the Christian Democrats won a respectable 9.5% of the vote and two seats, the Union for Liberty got no seats, and the major ruling party, the Social Democrats, got only 8.78% of the vote and two seats, compared with 30% in the 2002 legislative election. The coalition parties thus won fewer votes than the Communist Party (KSCM), which won 20.26%. The big winner in the election was the ODS, the right-wing eurosceptic party.

Those parties which are critical of the expansion of Europe defeated the pro-Europe coalition. Also noteworthy were two new parties not represented at the Prague parliament which also won respectable numbers of votes. These are the SNK-Ed, a liberal, pro-European organisation founded by the former Minister for Foreign Affairs, Josef Zieleniec, and the populist party Nezaavisli (independents), run by the former manager of a private television, being sued on a number of counts, who thus gained parliamentary immunity.

7. *Slovakia*

This country holds the sad record for the lowest turnout of the twenty-five Member States. Only 17% of the population voted. No doubt the closeness of the presidential election which had taken place a few months before and the unanimity of the Slovakian political parties on European questions is the reason for this massive abstention. The election results surprised the observers. The ruling parties won respectable numbers of votes and the party of the Prime Minister Milan Dzurinda (the SDKU) came out on top, ahead not only of Vladimir Meciar's HZDS, but also in front of Robert Fico's left-wing populist party (the SMER). However, the rate of abstention means that no general conclusions regarding the Slovakian party scenario can be drawn.

8. *Slovenia*

Turnout for the European election here was 28.35%. The various ruling parties won three seats as against four for the opposition parties, which could be seen as evidence of rejection of the government in office. These elections showed considerable growth in the NSI (centre right, with 23.5%) which only won 9% in the legislative elections of October 2004 and a slump for the party which has been the largest in Slovenia in recent years, the LDS, which in an alliance with the DeSus, won only 21.9% compared with 36% in the last legislative election.

B. *Trends by political families* ²⁰

After the June 2004 elections, the European People's Party had 268 MEPs. The present EPP consists of forty-three political parties from twenty-five Member States, nineteen of which are from the ten new Member States ²¹. The Central and Eastern European states with the largest number of MEPs are Poland (19), the Czech Republic (14) and Hungary (13), followed by Slovakia (8), Slovenia (4), Latvia and Cyprus (with 3 MEPs), Lithuania (2), Malta (2) and Estonia with a single MEP, making up 69 MEPs in all.

We can see that the centre right won most additional support, as had been foreshadowed. The EPP won the elections in the Czech Republic (ODS – 30%, SN/ED – 11%, KDU-CSL – 9.6%), in Cyprus (DISY – 28.2%), in Hungary (FIDESZ-47.4%), in Slovenia (NSi – 23.6%), in Slovakia (SDKU – 17.1%) and in Poland, a country we shall deal with later. In six of the ten new states, the parties affiliated to the EPP were the primary national political force in these elections. The heterogeneity of this group, however, should be noted, a feature which is increased particularly by the almost matter-of-course bundling together of two or three different political parties which are often opposed deriving from each of the Central and Eastern European states.

The second political force in the European Parliament is the socialist group. The ESP went from 232 MEPs in the 1999-2004 legislature to 198 MEPs in the new legislature, 31 of whom were from the ten new Member States. The ESP covered 28 political parties from 23 Member States (excluding Cyprus and Latvia), 10 of whom were newcomers. Among them the largest group was from Hungary (9 MEPs), followed by Poland, with 8 MEPs. The European socialists paid a significant price for the disastrous result of the Polish social democrats, the largest country among the newcomers in terms of seats in the European Parliament (54 seats).

The third political force in the Parliament in the new legislature is the liberal democratic reform group, the ELDR, with the new name of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE). It covers 31 party organisations, 9 from the newcomers, particularly Estonia (2 MEPs), Cyprus (1 MEP), Lithuania (7 MEPs), Latvia (1 MEP), Hungary (2 MEPs), Poland (4 MEPs) and Slovenia (2 MEPs).

In the 1999-2004 legislature, the Federal European United Left Group/the Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL) was the fourth group in the Parliament, while in the new legislature it was outstripped by the Green Group /Free European Alliance, by a single MEP (42 to 41). Cyprus (2 MEPs) and the Czech Republic (6 MEPs) were the only countries in the ten new Member States sitting in the GUE/NGL. As far as the Greens are concerned, only one Latvian party is represented.

The Independence and Democracy Group – IND DEM, the old European Democracy and Differences Group (EDD) is the fifth political force in the European Parliament. If the EDD had 28 MEPs immediately after the elections, the creation of this new group gave it 37 MEPs from the ten new EU countries, with one from the Czech Republic and ten from Poland.

The Union for the Europe of Nations (UEN) was outstripped in the new legislature by the former Group for the Europe of Democracies and Differences. It has 27 MEPs from seven party organisations, with 4 from Lithuania (2 MEPs), from Latvia (4 MEPs) and from Poland (7 MEPs from the Party for Law and Justice, PiS).

We note here that the MEPs from the new Member States mostly sit with the three large groupings: 69 in the EPP, 31 in ESP, 19 in the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, 13 in the Union for the Europe of Nations Group, 11 in the new Group for Independence and Democracy, 8 in the European United Left Group and one in the Greens Group. Ten unregistered MEPs can be added to their strength, one from the Czech Republic, six from Poland and three from Slovakia. Summing up, the political parties from Central and Eastern Europe in the new layout of the European Parliament total 25.74% in the EPP, 16.66% in the ESP, 21.59% in ALDE, 2.38% in the Greens Group, 19.51% in the GUE Group, 29.72% in the Independence and Democracy Group and 48.14% in the Union for the Europe of Nations.

The final count of the parties sitting in the Parliament is 183 ²², with 61 from the ten new Member States (five from the Czech Republic, six from Estonia, four from Cyprus, seven from Latvia, seven from Lithuania, four from Hungary, fourteen from Poland, five from Slovenia and eight from Slovakia).

3. Broad trends in the European elections in the Central European countries

On June 14, after the publication of the results, observers and the European press drew three major conclusions regarding the vote in the European election in the new Member States: record abstention, protest vote for certain parties in office and votes for eurosceptic parties, particularly of the far right. The two initial statements cannot be denied. Surveys and electoral results confirm the low turnout rate and the poor results achieved by the parties in office in most of the new Member States. Some statements must be made, however, regarding the eurosceptic vote in these countries and the victory of the far right. We therefore intend in this final section of our paper to qualify these three characteristics and elucidate some explanations.

We should point out initially that Cyprus and Malta, unlike the former peoples' democracies, registered a particularly high turnout rate. In Cyprus, where voting is mandatory, participation was 71.19%, while in Malta 82.37% of the population took part in the ballot. These two societies are traditionally highly politicised, with a turnout in the last legislative election standing at 96.2% in Cyprus and 90.5% in Malta. Hence, the leitmotif chosen by the various observers the day after the election refers only to countries in Central and Eastern Europe, profoundly affected by the "post-communist" experience. It was in these eight countries that the turnout was very low, where the turnout rate was less than 50%. Among them, the best turnouts were recorded in Lithuania (48.4%) and in Latvia (41.3%). In the other states, only

38.5% of the Hungarians, 28.3% of the Slovenes, 28.3% of the Czechs, 26.8% of the Estonians, 20.9% of the Poles and 17% of the Slovaks took part in the vote.

Turnout in the last legislative elections, for the ratification of the Membership Treaties and in the European elections of June 2004 in the 10 new Member States of the European Union.

	<i>Turnout at the last general elections</i> ²³	<i>Turnout at the 2003 membership referendums</i> ²⁴	<i>Turnout at the 2004 European Elections</i> ²⁵
Hungary	70.5%	45.62%	38.5%
Poland	46.3%	58.85%	20.9%
Czech Republic	58.0%	55.21%	28.3%
Slovakia	70.0%	52.15%	17.0%
Estonia	58.2%	64.02%	26.8%
Latvia	71.5%	72.53%	41.3%
Lithuania	55.9%	63.50%	48.4%
Malta	96.2%	91.00%	82.4%
Cyprus	90.5%	- ²⁶	71.2%
Slovenia	69.9%	60.44%	28.3%

A number of explanations can be put forward to account for this low turnout in the vote.

In the first place it should be recalled that this is a recurrent phenomenon in a number of elections in the region, revealing to some extent the difficulties arising from democratic consolidation. In these countries, fourteen years after the collapse of the Communist regimes, political parties and civil society organisations remain quite weak, widening the gap between the population and the political-economic elites. It is a fact that if we look at the turnouts in the elections being held in these countries since the beginning of the nineties, we notice that in June 2004, in the European elections, the turnout rate was the lowest. But this was not a feature of Central and Eastern Europe. Some countries among the fifteen old Member States also registered a high abstention rate. This was the case in Germany, with 43% in the 2004 elections as compared with 45.2% in 1999, 60% in 1994, 62.3% in 1989, 56.8% in 1984 and 65.7% in 1979; it was also the case in France, where the turnout in June was 43.1%; in Spain (45.9%), Sweden (37.2%), Austria (41.8%) and Finland (41.1%).

A second explanation for this low turnout in the European elections in the Central and Eastern European countries would be that one year previously, when these states had already reached an end of the debates, they held referendums relating to membership of the European Union. Since a "European" vote had been held between March and September 2003, in June 2004 the population had the feeling that they had already made their decision.

Specialists have described this low turnout in the European elections as being due to “Eurofatigue”²⁷. Furthermore, a high number of elections had preceded the June ballot. In Slovakia, for example, the European elections marked the end of a busy electoral agenda which had begun in April with the presidential elections and the referendum on the upcoming legislative election²⁸. This was exacerbated by the complexity of the ballot, of which the number of lists and candidates are just a couple of examples. In the Czech Republic there were 800 candidates for the 24 seats available in the European Parliament. In Slovakia, 184 candidates for 14 seats²⁹. It was also the first election of its type in these countries. And there were tangential events which would have affected the level of participation. In Lithuania, turnout was better because the referendum was held the same day as the presidential election. And if participation was particularly low in Poland, it was because the elections took place during a long weekend, from June 10 to 13.

A third explanation is that the European Parliament is the European institution about which the populations of the new Member States know least. In the last ten years the people of these countries will have heard a great deal talked about the Council, about the various European summits and about the European Commission which appears every Autumn centre stage in the national media when the annual reports on the progress made by each candidate country on its road to membership of the EU are published. The European Parliament did not enjoy the same visibility in the ten new Member States. As indeed is the situation in “old Europe”, in Central and Eastern Europe the voter’s understanding of the role and function of the Parliament is particularly poor, despite its increasing importance in the institutional architecture following the successive revisions brought about by the Treaties.

A final explanation could be that the governments of the Central and Eastern European countries did little to motivate the voters regarding this election. As in other States in the Union, European elections have very seldom been the occasion of discussion about the future of Europe, the shape that Europe should have or the activities of future European Parliaments. In this respect Poland was to some extent out of step with the other Central and Eastern European countries, as it was deeply involved in the debate about the future Constitution of the European Union. In Poland, within the framework of their electoral campaigns, several parties reiterated the importance of the introduction of a reference to Christian values in the body of the constitutional Treaty. But yet again, the fact that the European elections in the majority of these states bore on national issues is not a unique feature of the Central and Eastern European vote. It is a constant upon which researchers have insisted after every European election among the fifteen old Member States.

A vote intended to protest against the party in power was the second point commented upon by observers and journalists the day following the European elections, since these elections gave the people the chance to vote against the governments in office. Here are a few examples to underline these observations. Initially worthy of note is the case of Poland, significant not only because of the low turnout, but also because of the low results achieved by the party in office. The Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) won a mere 9.3% of the votes, that is, five seats out of the 54 available in the EP, while the opposition party, the Civic Platform (PO), won

a 24% of the votes, representing fifteen seats in the EPP group. The PO was followed by the League of Polish Families (LPR) with 15.9%, that is, ten seats in the Group for Independence and Democracy, the Law and Justice Party (PiS), which won 12.7% of the votes, with seven seats in the Europe of the Nations group, Samoobrona with 10.8% and six MEPs, not yet registered. The same was true in Hungary, where the opposition party, the FIDESz, won twelve seats (47.4%), while the party in power, the MSZP, won 34.3% of the votes (nine seats out of the 24 available). In the Czech Republic, the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) alone obtained 30% of the votes, while the Social Democratic Party of the Prime Minister in office, Vladimir Spidla, came out fifth, with 8.8% of the votes. The only country where the party in power came out in the first position in the European elections was Slovakia. The SDKU scored 17.1%, followed by the opposition parties: the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (LS/HZDS) with 17%, the Direction Party (SMER/SDL) with 16.9%, the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) with 16.2% and the Hungarian minority Party (SMK) with 13.2%.

Low turnout and protest votes against the parties in office are therefore an undoubted reality. The idea that the populations of Central and Eastern Europe would have voted in large numbers for anti-European, eurosceptic or extremist parties, however, needs to be qualified. First, it would be necessary to make a distinction between these categories, since they do not form a coherent whole. It is impossible to detect any indication of shared identity between populism and euroscepticism³⁰. Anti-European populist movements do exist, but so do pro-European populist movements. Nor are all populist movements of the far right. A distinction must also be made between eurosceptic parties and anti-European parties. And there are certainly perfectly democratic eurosceptic movements. Defining a huge “anti-European” faction is politically dangerous and scientifically false.

Indeed, a detailed analysis of the results from the Central European countries throws light upon such suggestions. Actually, some states did not send to the European Parliament representatives for whom euroscepticism is a key element of their identity. This applies to Slovenia, Hungary and Slovakia. In the Baltic nations, in Estonia and Latvia, a remarkably strong general consensus regarding the defence of national identity is to be found, but that in no way implies of necessity a eurosceptic or anti-European political position.

In fact, only two states have sent a strong eurosceptic party contingent to the European parliament – the Czech Republic, with the Civic Democratic Party, the ODS (9 seats) and the Bohemia/Moravia Communist Party, the KSCM (6 seats); and Poland, with the League of Polish Families, the LPR, (10 seats), Samoobrona (6 seats) and the Law and Justice Party (7 seats).

Also of interest is the fact that the Central European countries have sent very few MEPs from eurosceptic groups to the European Parliament (24 out of the 64 MEPs making up these groups).

These affiliations may, of course, be deceptive and cannot be used as a basis for establishing an exact party typology. Indeed, the British Conservatives sit with the EPP, as does the ODS.

Summing up all the information emerging from Central Europe and isolating positions which could be deemed eurosceptic produces somewhere between 40 and 50 MEPs, 40 of whom come from the Czech Republic and Poland.

And even among these parties which are eurosceptic or opposed to European enlargement there exist a number of shades of thinking, or differences on European issues. This is obviously the case among the European Members of Parliament. It is obviously the case among the delegations from the Czech Civic Party (ODS) or the Bohemia/Moravia Communist Party (KSCM).

Account must also be taken of the classical “Europeanization” process, underwent by a significant proportion of the representatives elected to the European Parliament. Previous enlargements have shown how MEPs arriving in Brussels with different positions may change or modify them. Working as a commission on portfolios may cause points of view to develop. A growing understanding of the complexity of the problems, a better understanding of European institutions, permanent dialogue with colleagues of other nationalities or other groups and political realities throw light on this process. A similar process will probably take place in the case of the new Member States since the representatives’ knowledge of the operations of the European Parliament would still be quite limited, particularly as regards representatives from eurosceptic or anti-European lists.

The first elections to the European Parliament in Central and Eastern Europe have accentuated certain trends already present among the fifteen old Member States: low electoral turnout, but also protest votes against the government in power. On the whole, these elections confirm the considerable unpopularity of the governing coalitions or parties. The Czech Prime Minister has already been replaced and his Polish colleague resigned. Political leaders appear to have to pay the price for those policies with extremely burdensome social costs implemented precisely for the purpose of getting in the European Union. These leaders have not, to put it mildly, been rewarded for having succeeded in making their states members of the European Union. This is something of a paradox ...

Notes

¹ See : “Le référendum”, *Pouvoirs*, 77, 1996, 272 p.; M. GALLAGHER and P.V ULERI (ed.), *The referendum experience in Europe*, Macmillan Press, 1996, 263 p.; D. BUTLER and A. RANNEY (ed.), *Referendums around the World. The Growing Use of Direct Democracy*, Macmillan, 1994; D. BUTLER and A. RANNEY, *A Comparative Study of Practice and Theory*, Washington DC, American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1978; L. MOREL, “Le référendum: état des recherches”, *Revue française de science politique*, 42/5, October 1992; G. SMITH, “The referendum and political change”, *Government and Opposition*, 10/3, 1975, p. 294-305; M. QVORTRUPP, *A comparative study of referendums*, Manchester University Press, 2002, 183 p.; M. GUILLAUME-HOFNUNG, *Le référendum*, PUF, 1987, 128 p.

² B. KAUFMAAN, D. WATERS, *Direct democracy in Europe*, Carolina Academic Press, 2004, 180 p.

³ *Ibid.*

- ⁴ I. BUDGE, *The new challenge of direct democracy*, Polity Press, 1996, 203 p.
- ⁵ A. RANNEY, “Référendum et démocratie”, *Pouvoirs*, 77, 1996, p. 7-19.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- ⁸ P. V. ULERI, “Introduction”, in M. GALLAGHER and P.V ULERI (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 1-17.
- ⁹ M. GALLAGHER, “Conclusion”, in M. GALLAGHER and P.V ULERI (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 238.
- ¹⁰ L. MOREL, “La pratique dans les démocraties libérales”, *Pouvoirs*, 77, 1996, p. 21.
- ¹¹ S. HUG, *Voices of Europe, Citizens, referendums, and European integration*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2002, 171 p.
- ¹² B. KAUFMAAN, D. WATERS, *op. cit.*, p. 146-155.
- ¹³ J.-M. DE WAELE, *L'émergence des partis politiques en Europe centrale*, Bruxelles, Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1999.
- ¹⁴ The Czech ODS and, to a lesser extent, the Communist Party of Bohemia Moravia are exceptions.
- ¹⁵ J.-M. DE WAELE, R. COMAN, “Les élections européennes de 2004 en Europe centrale”, in P. DELWIT, Ph. POIRIER (ed.), *Parlement puissant, électeurs absents? Les élections européennes de juin 2004*, Brussels, Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2005, p. 79-93.
- ¹⁶ J.-M. DE WAELE (ed.), *Les clivages politiques en Europe centrale et orientale*, Brussels, Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2004.
- ¹⁷ J.-M. DE WAELE, “L'émergence, l'organisation et les spécificités des partis politiques dans les pays candidats”, *Pouvoirs*, 106, 2003.
- ¹⁸ *The Baltic Times, News from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania*, “Estonia best prepared for the Euro parliament elections”, <http://www.baltictimes.com>.
- ¹⁹ This party will gain again at the new general elections of October 2004, encapsulating 28.4%. The party is currently in office in coalition with the Social Democrats.
- ²⁰ J.-M. DE WAELE, R. COMAN, “Les nouveaux Européens aux urnes”, *Romanian Political Science Review Studia Politica*, 4/3, 2004, p. 529-540.
- ²¹ Situation at the 20th of July 2004, <http://www.elections2004.eu.int/ep-election/sites/fr/results1306/parties.html>
- ²² <http://www.elections2004.eu.int/ep-election/sites/fr/yourparliament/outgoingparl/parties.html>
- ²³ www.electionworld.org
- ²⁴ http://www.elections2004.eu.int/ep-election/sites/fr/yourparliament/more_information.html
- ²⁵ Eurobarometer, “Post European Elections 2004 Survey”, http://europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/flash/FL162fr.pdf, p. 7.
- ²⁶ Ratification of the Membership Treaty by vote at the National Parliament.
- ²⁷ Fr. BAFOIL, “Quelques réflexions sur les résultats des élections européennes en Europe centrale de 2004”, CERI/CNRS, July 2004, p. 1.
- ²⁸ C. BILLAUD, Fr. RICHARD, “Les élections européennes de juin 2004 en Pologne, République tchèque et Slovaquie: analyse des scrutins”, CEFRES.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ P. TAGGART, “Populism and the Pathology of Representative Politics”, in Y. MENY, Y. SUREL (ed.), *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, London, Palgrave, 2002; P. TAGGART, A. SZCZERBIAK, “The Party Politics of euroscepticism in EU Member and Candidate States”, *OERN Working Paper*, 6, April 2002; P. TAGGART, A. SZCZERBIAK, “Parties, Positions and Europe: Euroscepticism in the EU Candidate States of Central and Eastern Europe’ *OERN Working Paper*, 2, May 2001.