

Columnists

Behind The Headlines

Published: Sunday June 1, 2014 MYT 12:00:00 AM

EU teetering on the brink, almost

By Bunn Nagara



The recent elections to the European Parliament exposed raw feelings and troubling thoughts about the way the EU has been heading.

JUST as Europe tussled with Russia over issues of regional identity in Crimea and Ukraine, grave questions hung over its prime regionalist project: the European Union.

People in the EU's founding member nations, no less, were becoming disillusioned with the EU. Ironically, this was expressed most vividly in elections to the European Parliament that concluded last Sunday.

Individuals, groups and political parties opposed to the EU's purpose and plans won surprisingly strong support. Others seen as championing the EU lost considerably.

Anti-EU parties won nearly a third of the EU's 751-seat legislature, marking an unprecedented advance. France's National Front party, long on the far-right fringe, also captured a resounding 30% of the country's 74 seats.

The National Front is committed to withdrawing France from the Eurozone and then from the EU. Its sudden shock wins speak of widespread support for a return to more familiar and comfortable times.

Austria's right-wing fringe Freedom Party doubled its EU parliamentary seats to four. Although some say the anti-EU vote was constant because another like-minded party did not contest, The Greens – critical of EU fiscal policy – also won impressively.

Germany saw the rise of the small anti-euro Alternative for Germany party. By winning a surprising 7% of the German vote and some half a dozen seats, the party gets a larger presence in the European Parliament than ever before.

Much of the reported "right-wing invasion" has stunned Europe's establishment parties and mainstream Western media. This has promoted common misreporting about the purported rise of the far right.

The leap of fringe parties to the political centre is undeniably unsettling – for those which have long dominated that centre. For the newly minted winners, it is a most welcome turnaround.

The French prime minister called the phenomenon a "shock" and an "earthquake", while the president himself found it painful and embarrassing. The tiny National Front party had won decisively more than the governing Socialist Party.

President François Hollande bemoaned a perception of the far-right party triumphing in France, a country of "human rights and freedom." He had misread the trend entirely.

The precise nature and causes of this voter swing need to be understood by all parties including the media: it is not a swing for the (far) right, but against a doddering EU helpless against dire economic challenges while still encroaching into national sovereign rights and individual personal liberties.

Parties on the far right fringe have always been a presence in pluralist Europe. On the basis of their ideology, there is no reason for their surge now or at any time in the foreseeable future.

Besides, their gains this time are neither consistent nor comprehensive throughout Europe.

There are at least as many that have lost in this European election than there are winners.

Austria's Freedom Party, Belgium's Flemish Interest, Britain's BNP, Italy's Northern League and the Netherlands' Party for Freedom all did worse this time than before. Popular support for Italy's anti-establishment Five-Star Movement, which seemed so obvious just two months earlier, suddenly vanished.

Neither the Five-Star Movement nor the Alternative for Germany party can be described as far right. Austria's Greens are not right wing at all.

Those parties fitting that description may have won despite, rather than because of, their rightist credentials. It is each party's policies and their presentation, rather than their "compass bearings," that determine their fate.

In Greece, the party that did surprisingly well was the leftist Syriza. Already the main party in the Opposition, it performed the best among all Greek parties in the European elections.

The common factor among far right parties is opposition to looser immigration controls among EU countries. Sometimes this spills into racism and xenophobia, which are generally unacceptable.

The unifying factor among all the parties that did surprisingly well, however, is a sense that a distant, faceless EU bureaucracy has proven unresponsive to popular needs.

These include being free from EU strictures and seeing to national economic well-being, such as in not having to bail out a troubled EU economy.

In Germany, those unsympathetic to bailing out other economies generally did well. Syriza in Greece triumphed by arguing the opposite – that EU bailouts of the Greek economy had been insufficient.

The more successful parties have been those that had pressed the case for addressing such popular concerns in the public interest.

The media have tended to downplay this as “populism”, but it is a mistake to underrate such strong sentiment rooted in such tough issues.

Given these developments, EU bureaucrats who stubbornly stick to their standard rhetoric will miss the salient issues that resonate with ordinary Europeans.

The official response undergoes a predictable process – denial, scapegoating (the media) and reassurances that things are not really so bad.

And if these Eurocrats have only lately turned their attention from Ukraine in Europe’s far east, they may be surprised that the most telling signs against the EU narrative is in the continent’s far west: Britain.

The British Conservative Party, as exemplified by the Thatcher era, was never a gung-ho European party. But things have apparently moved on somewhat within the party since then.

Today, Prime Minister David Cameron’s Conservative Party is rather more European.

But it is a party that has failed to assure Britons adequately that their national and societal interests would not be compromised by deepening EU-crazy.

The results are clear in these latest EU parliamentary elections across the board. Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg’s pro-EU Liberal Democrats were almost wiped out, losing 11 seats to retain only one.

That has triggered a call for Clegg to quit, a cross-party move that involves even some of his party colleagues. Thus a vote in the European Parliament can also have consequences in national governments.

Britain’s clear and biggest winner in a century is leading Eurosceptic Nigel Farage’s Ukip (UK Independence Party), which scored the largest victory by beating both Conservatives and Labour, the country’s largest parties.

Ukip’s platform: to take Britain as well as Europe out of the EU. It claimed some two dozen seats, while the Liberal Democrats limped home in fifth place.

Now Ukip is set to be the kingmaker in next year’s general election, if not to win it outright. Although some of the party’s support is likely to dwindle, much of its strength can be expected to remain.

Farage, a former Conservative Party member, has found a new niche and made it mainstream. Perhaps some of his Euroscepticism is part of the Conservatives’ lost legacy which Ukip now claims as its own.

A reason for the EU's faltering appeal is a growing elitism at the heart of its decision-making.

Between the Paris and Rome treaties, and the subsequent Maastricht treaty, the EU became more aloof and alienated from the people.

This is not how other regional groupings such as Asean should go. In recent years, Asean has tried to move from a firmly state-centric position to a "people-oriented" one.

Malaysia's chairmanship of Asean next year would move it further to a "people-centred" position.

Would the EU deign to learn anything from South-East Asian nations, Europe's former colonies?

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