

David Cameron will face challenges both at home and abroad after the votes are counted in the European Parliament elections

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*The UK's Conservative Party does not sit with other mainstream centre-right parties in the European Parliament as a member of the European People's Party, but instead sits in a smaller group, the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR). **Tim Bale** assesses some of the challenges the party might face after the European Parliament elections on 22-25 May. He notes that with opinion polls predicting a difficult result for the Conservatives and some of their ECR allies, the party will face a dilemma over how to strengthen its position within the parliament, while also balancing discontent in his own party in the run up to the UK general election in 2015.*



To say the Tories are unlikely to do as well in May 2014 as they did in June 2009 is a bit of an understatement. Five years ago they topped the UK poll, getting just under 4.2 million votes or nearly 28 per cent of the total, and giving them 26 seats. This year it looks like they will not only finish third, but may not even achieve 25 per cent of the vote.

In the absolute nightmare scenario, the Tories would be reduced to barely double-figures. In the worst-case it will be around 15 seats. They will be hoping, and probably expecting, however, to get a little closer to 20 than that. Anything over 20 would still be embarrassing, but could probably be spun as something other than devastating – especially if the quirks of the regional electoral system allow David Cameron to at least claim to have beaten Nigel Farage in seats, if not in votes.

Whether the reaction on the Conservative backbenches and at the grassroots level will be worse if UKIP tops the poll or if Labour comes first instead is a moot point. Rationally, the second of these two outcomes should probably worry the party more than the first. But many Tories have long since left rationality behind when it comes to Europe and to UKIP. There will be bedwetting, if not blood. Right-wingers will demand policy changes and even those who are less zealous will call for Cameron to get a grip.



David Cameron at a European Council press conference, Credit: Number 10 (CC-BY-SA-ND-NC-3.0)

The most obvious way he can appear to do this is by holding a reshuffle in which Grant Shapps is relieved of the Party Chairmanship and some media-friendly right-wingers (plus some supposedly salt-of-the-earth types) are promoted into the Cabinet or at least on to the front bench. If Number Ten plays things true to form it will – assuming it hasn't already shot its bolt during the campaign itself – respond by appearing to harden its stance on renegotiation with Europe and conjuring up yet more 'tough, new' measures on immigration, ideally ones which involve limiting benefits that can be claimed by migrants from EU member states.

The hope has to be that this will buy time while the bounce that Farage will undoubtedly get from giving Clegg, and

now Cameron, a bloody nose fades. If UKIP's leader has also managed to do the same to Ed Miliband by beating Labour into second place, then things might be a little easier. In that event, it may be possible – especially now that the economy seems to have turned the corner – to persuade the party, and the party in the media, that the 'real losers' of this election are Labour and the Lib Dems. Polling should help if it eventually starts to suggest that a lot of those who lent their support to UKIP did so only temporarily, largely in order to give the government a good kicking before settling down again in the run-up to the general election in a year's time.

It remains a possibility that Cameron will surprise everyone with a genuinely dramatic move, such as declaring in terms that he would like to be shot of the Liberal Democrats sooner rather than later. But it remains only an outside possibility. Rather more likely is a renewal of previous speculation as to who will take over from Cameron should he lose the general election. This is damaging because it is distracting – but probably not fatally so. After all, nobody seriously thinks anyone else but the current occupant of Number 10 will be leading the party into the next election.

As far as the campaign – such as it is – goes, it will largely focus on the home front. But there is one continental concern that Cameron will have to watch. Since the Conservatives are not a member of any of the big party groups putting up a candidate for the presidency, the Conservatives, like UKIP, do not have a dog in that particular race, which is bound to increase the temptation for some Tories to cite it as an example of the supposedly remote, self-deluded and self-aggrandising second-raters who want to run Britain from Brussels. Too much overt criticism by Tories of the EPP's pick, Jean-Claude Juncker, may well irritate other centre-right parties, with whom Cameron needs to keep on reasonably friendly terms if he is to stand any chance of achieving a reform package he can sell at home during a referendum campaign in 2017.

The main concern on this score, however, will come after the campaign is over and bargaining begins. And it involves – perhaps inevitably given Germany's pre-eminence – Angela Merkel. She is absolutely determined that the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) – the German Eurosceptic party which, despite its limitations, presents a challenge to her CDU – not be lent legitimacy and credibility by being invited by Tory MEPs to join their European Conservatives and Reformist (ECR) group in the European Parliament.

The trouble for the Prime Minister is that the ECR, in order to conform with EP rules that official recognition and funding only goes to groups with at least 25 MEPs from at least seven member states, may, in the wake of a contest that is likely to wipe out some of its existing components, be casting around desperately for some half-way respectable allies.

All this could mean Cameron having to choose between, on the one hand, a Tory delegation in Brussels stranded, friendless and powerless, outside the group system or, on the other, sacrificing virtually any chance he has of enlisting Merkel's help with his renegotiation efforts. These elections are easily dismissed, but they matter to the Conservatives – not just domestically, but because domestic politics and diplomacy are now inextricably intertwined.

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Note: This article is based on an earlier article at the [Political Studies Association](#) and gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP, nor of the London School of Economics.

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