

Eurosceptic parties will have success in the 2014 European elections, but their impact in the European Parliament will be limited

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One of the key issues in relation to the 2014 European Parliament elections is the potential for an unprecedented number of Eurosceptic and populist parties to secure seats. [Simon Usherwood](#) writes that while Eurosceptic parties such as UKIP in the UK, the Front National in France, and the PVV in the Netherlands may come out on top of their national votes, there are real obstacles to them actively influencing the work of the parliament itself. Ultimately the main issue may be whether they can use the platform gained in 2014 to secure real power in the next European elections in 2019.



One of the most long-standing predictions about the May elections has been that Eurosceptics will do well. From the UK to Greece, Finland to Italy, voices that are critical of the EU and of European integration in general have been on the advance. While that is likely to translate into success in seats, it will be important to remember that such groups will operate under some severe constraints.

Eurosceptics have always been present in European Parliament elections and have always won seats, starting with the Danish [People's Movement](#) in 1979. Typically small in number, these MEPs normally operated on the margins of the Parliament's life, at best adding a critical edge to some reports, but more likely self-excluding themselves (as described by [Nathalie Brack](#)). A series of somewhat ramshackle groupings ensued, but to little effect.

With the current elections there is potential for this to change significantly. Firstly, the pervasiveness of Euroscepticism is much more striking. In traditionally more sceptical member states, anti-EU parties are likely to further increase their vote share: UKIP in the UK is likely to take first place in both vote share and seats won, even if it's not yet [evident](#) in the polls. In some previously pro-EU countries, sceptical voices are likely to do well too: [Golden Dawn](#) in Greece and the Dutch [Freedom Party](#) (PVV) are both polling well. Even in states that have traditionally driven integration, sceptics are likely to make their influence felt, as in Germany, with the [AfD](#), or France, with the [FN](#). In short, the volume and spread of sceptics will increase [markedly](#).



Nigel Farage, Credit: Euro Realist Newsletter (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Secondly, the degree of interaction between individual parties will be greater than before. Historically, sceptics have been motivated primarily by nationally-constructed priorities, with little concern for what happened elsewhere. By contrast, this cycle has seen the formation of an [electoral pact between the FN and the PVV](#), with support from the Belgian Vlaams Belang and the Italian Lega Nord. With the possible success of the French and Dutch parties, this will be more than likely to produce enough MEPs to secure a grouping in the EP with a common agenda that extends beyond the usual sceptic minimalism of "we all dislike the EU, but don't agree on anything else."

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the 2014 elections have seen a growing wave of concern from non-sceptics about the coming entrants. From [politicians](#) to the [media](#) and even in [academia](#), the view is very much that scepticism is a genuine point of concern and requires action. Seen in this light, the [recent challenge](#) by the pro-EU Liberal Democrats to UKIP to a TV debate makes more sense – the [first debate](#) having been held yesterday, with a second debate scheduled for 2 April.

Constraints on Eurosceptic parties

Taken together, there is every reason to suspect that Euroscepticism is about to enjoy at least a moment in the limelight, from which it can potentially develop further. However, it is also important to take all of this with a large pinch of salt, since a number of constraints are going to come into play.

The first key limitation will be the European Parliament itself. Over the past couple of decades, it has tightened up its rules of procedure on the thresholds needed to form a group, primarily because it wanted to ring-fence more marginal voices in the hemicycle. The consequence of this will be that Eurosceptics will find it hard to organise themselves.

As I have discussed in more length [elsewhere](#), the key problem will be that the parties likely to have most MEPs, that is UKIP, the FN and the Conservatives, have mutually excluded themselves from working together, which either means three separate groups, or two groups and a party – most likely the Conservatives – sitting as independents. The most recent [Pollwatch](#) figures are instructive on this point, with a big increase in Independents, rather than in the sceptic groupings.

This matters because an institutionally fragmented set of sceptics will wield less power in the EP's system of allocating key roles and duties, as well as having less access to institutional support. This latter point has been vital for a series of parties over the years in securing a funding stream to develop their activities in their home country.

All this points to a second area where the impact of sceptics will be weaker. UKIP recognises that it would be political suicide for the 2015 general election to be aligned with a far-right grouping in the European Parliament. So while part of the antipathy between the FN and UKIP is policy-driven, it is also about personalities. A large number of the sceptical parties have strong, charismatic leaders – Nigel Farage, Marine Le Pen, Geert Wilders, Timo Soini, Beppe Grillo, etc. – who have built up parties around themselves and who have either implicit or explicit modes of operation that reject working with others.

In many cases, this is about marking their parties out as being different from the rest and offering a genuine place for protest and alternative politics. But whatever the reasoning, it has the result that the culture of building common cause with others will be that much more difficult. Witness the current Eurosceptic block in the Parliament – [Europe of Freedom and Democracy](#) – which asks nothing of its constituent parties beyond holding a position of opposition to the European Union, with a commensurate [lack of voting cohesion](#).

Finally, even if there is more cooperation than in previous cycles, Eurosceptics remain a very diverse bunch. Indeed, it is important to note that it is precisely this [diversity](#) that has bolstered the rise of critical voices across Europe. Sceptics are drawn from across the political spectrum, with myriad critiques of the EU and its operation, so to see them as all of a piece would be to miss their differences. In particular, the focus on populism and far-right variants of Euroscepticism – while understandable – is to conflate different things: the green critique of integration lies far from that of a radical right party, for instance.

Eurosceptics are divided by more than what they share in their scepticism. Beyond noting their dislike of the EU, they struggle to agree on why they dislike it and – even more so – what should be done about it.

The upshot is that while sceptics are likely to do well in May, their impact on either the Parliament or the Union more generally will be relatively small, for the reasons outlined above. The real danger will lie in pro-integration elements assuming that this will solve the underlying problems. In that case, 2014 risks looking like a gentle preparation for

what is to come in 2019.

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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.

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