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On the project

Euroscepticism and the European Parliament elections in 2014, the EU's Neighbourhood in light of the Ukraine crisis and power relations in the EU: The EU-28 Watch project is mapping out discourses on these issues in European policies all over Europe. Research institutes from all 28 member states as well as Iceland, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey give overviews on the discourses in their respective countries.

This survey was conducted on the basis of a questionnaire that has been elaborated in March 2014. Most of the 33 reports were delivered in June 2014. This issue and all previous issues are available on the EU-28 Watch website: www.EU-28Watch.org.

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Ireland

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1. Euroscepticism and the European Parliament elections

Local and national issues dominate the Irish campaign

The main topics in the Irish campaign were local and national issues due, at least in part, to the fact that voting in the European Parliament elections took place on the same day as local elections and two national by-elections.

One set of issues that was consistently raised relates to the economy, austerity and unemployment. Unemployment in Ireland was 11.8 percent in April 2014, with youth unemployment at 24.3 percent. The focus of the discussion was generally not on the European policy responses to these issues and related rather to the national dimensions.

Other recurring issues during the campaign involved public acceptance of energy infrastructure, primarily wind farms and electricity pylons, to which there is strong opposition in certain rural communities. Controversial government initiatives such as the restriction of subsidised medical care and the introduction of water charges and a local property tax also featured in the campaign.

It is important to note, however, that Irish politics tends to be predominantly personality-based, as opposed to issue- or party-based. The 2014 European election campaign has not diverged in any significant way from this tradition, although the typical campaigning style of directly canvassing voters was somewhat disturbed following the redrawing of the constituency boundaries this year. This was necessitated by the reduction of Irish MEPs to be elected from twelve to eleven; as a result, three 3-seat euro-constituencies were re-divided to create two larger 4-seat constituencies (South and Midlands-North-West). The Dublin 3-seat constituency remained unchanged.

The role of the “Spitzenkandidaten” or lead candidates for the position of European Commission President was not significant in the Irish campaign. The “Spitzenkandidaten” did not feature on any election posters or in any of the literature delivered by Irish political parties to households around the country. Despite some attention to this aspect of the elections in the broadsheet media, it did not feature in the televised debates between the candidates in Ireland.

Unsurprisingly then, there has been minimal public engagement with the lead candidate process. Recent IPSOS research found that only 29 percent of Irish people surveyed had an opinion on Jean-Claude Juncker, and the figures were even lower for Martin Schulz (25 percent) and Guy Verhofstadt (21 percent).

Growing Euroscepticism?

Right-wing Eurosceptic candidates and parties are largely absent from the national political landscape, although some British-owned anti-European newspapers do produce Irish editions (for instance the Sunday Times, the Irish Daily Mail, the Irish Sun). Those Eurosceptic politicians that exist are overwhelmingly on the left and predominantly outside of the mainstream.

The two parties in coalition government, Fine Gael and Labour, are broadly pro-European. It is notable, however, that neither of the government parties topped the poll in any of the three constituencies. Labour failed to win any seats, meaning that Ireland will have no representation in the strong Socialists and Democrats grouping in the new European Parliament.

Brian Crowley, a sitting MEP from the main pro-European opposition party, Fianna Fáil, had a resounding victory in the South constituency and will serve a fifth term in the European Parliament. However, no other Fianna Fáil candidates were elected, pointing to a trend of pro-European parties both in government and opposition losing ground.

Sinn Féin, a left wing party committed to reuniting the island of Ireland, won three of the eleven Irish seats in the European Parliament. Lynn Boylan, incoming MEP who topped the poll in Dublin, describes her party as “Eurocritical”, which she defines as neither Eurosceptic nor Europhile but critically assessing each piece of legislation on its own merit. She also indicated that the reason she stood for election was that she was ‘fed up with people telling us that we should somehow be grateful to the European Union’. Sinn Féin received 19 percent of first preference votes nationally.

Three independent candidates were also elected, with two of the three, Marian Harkin (ALDE) and Nessa Childers (NI), re-elected from the previous parliament. New to the European Parliament is left-leaning independent politician, Luke “Ming” Flanagan, who was already well known as a national politician. He was the most popular candidate in the vast Midlands-North-West constituency. His election literature explains that the European project has ‘gone too far’ and describes monetary union as ‘a calamitous mistake’. He believes that ‘the future of Ireland and Europe is best served without the Euro currency’.

Despite the strong link between these results and local, national and personality issues, broader changes in Irish attitudes towards the EU can be detected. On one hand, since entry into the EU-IMF recovery programme, trust in the EU among Irish people is 23 percentage points lower than before the crisis began. Thus, the crisis and the bailout have had an important impact on Irish attitudes towards the EU. On the other hand, some recovery is now in evidence, and trust levels have improved over the last year. Furthermore, the latest Eurobarometer survey (Standard Eurobarometer 80, Autumn 2013) shows that 40 percent of Irish people still have a positive image of the EU – higher than the EU average (31 percent) and far above the figures in each of the other bailout countries.

Irish turnout down but still strong

Ireland elected eleven MEPs for the 2014-2019 legislature, with a turnout of 51.2 percent.

Overall the results were:

Fine Gael (EPP)	4 (unchanged)
Sinn Féin (GUE/NGL)	3 (+3)
Independents (various)	3 (+1)
Fianna Fáil (ALDE)	1 (-2)
Labour (S&D)	0 (-2)
Socialist Party (GUE/NGL)	0 (-1)

Initial statistical analysis has found a strong correlation between voters’ positions on national issues and the votes cast in the European elections and only a weak correlation between views on EU issues and votes cast.

If the European Parliament elections in Ireland are viewed as a mid-term verdict on the government, it is clear that a strong negative message has been sent to the Labour Party, which lost both of its European Parliament seats. Fine Gael, the main governing party, retained the same number of seats as before the elections, despite a reduction in the number of MEPs to be returned from Ireland.

The turnout of 51.2 percent is well above the EU average, as has been the case on the last two occasions. Turnout has declined from 58.64 percent in 2009, although it is difficult to draw conclusions from this data when numerous types of election are held on the same day.

Links:

- Linda Barry, [The hidden power-play that lies beneath these EU elections](#), 22 May 2014.
- Linda Barry, [Infographic – Redrawing the Map: European Parliament Elections in Ireland](#), 13 March 2014.
- Stephen Collins, [Majority not interested in European polls – survey](#), 12 May 2014
- Pat Cox, [Renewing EU Institutions: Timeline – Players – Play](#), 27 March 2014
- Euractiv, [Slightly higher election turnout averted a ‘big disaster’](#), 26 May 2014.
- Ríona Ní Flanngaile, [Letter from the Chief Returning Officer to the Secretary-General of the European Parliament listing the persons elected in Ireland](#), 5 June 2014.
- IIEA, European Commission, [Outcome of the 2014 European Parliament Elections: What’s Different?](#), 28 May 2014.
- Dr. Stephen Quinlan, [Standard Eurobarometer 80: National Report – Ireland](#), European Commission, Autumn 2013
- Dermot Scott (ed.), [Europe Is Our Story: Towards a New Narrative for the European Union](#), 30 April 2014.
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2. The EU’s Neighbourhood

Russia’s violation of international rule of law a concern for Ireland

Irish foreign policy is traditionally focused on the promotion of human rights, disarmament, multilateralism and the international rule of law. Ireland’s view, consistent with that of other EU Member States, is that the international rule of law was violated by Russia with its annexation of Crimea. The Minister for Foreign Affairs, Tánaiste Eamon Gilmore TD, condemned Russia’s actions in Crimea and called on Russia to respect Ukraine’s territorial integrity. Ireland was among the countries in the EU that were in favour of expanding the list of individuals in Russia to which sanctions should apply. Efforts will continue to try to restore relations with Russia in the future at bilateral and EU level. Negotiations will be delicate and difficult and will depend on finding appropriate and peaceful solutions to this serious crisis.

As Ireland is geographically distant from Russia, future relations between the two countries do not feature prominently in public discourse. Nevertheless, Russia is one of Ireland’s most important trade partners outside of the U.S. and EU. Irish firms exported goods and services worth about €637 million to Russia last year. Irish ministers have led a number of trade delegations to Russia and an Ireland-Russia Joint Economic Commission has been operating for several years. This is a formal intergovernmental body dealing with all aspects of trade development between the two countries.

Ireland supports a common European policy to promote stability in Eastern Europe

Ireland supports the Eastern Partnership as a means of promoting democracy, rule of law and economic development in the EU's neighbourhood. Recent events in Ukraine highlight the importance of stability in Europe's neighbourhood and the need for a common European policy to that end. Although Ireland is geographically distant, it is familiar with the challenges facing the region following its 2012 Chairmanship of the OSCE, during which it led negotiations on frozen conflicts in Moldova and the South Caucasus.

Among the general public, sympathy lies with the Ukrainian people in their struggle for democracy but there has been little political or public debate about the future of EU relations with Ukraine or other Eastern Partnership countries. Ireland supports the Association Agreement which heralds a stronger relationship between the EU and the Eastern Partnership countries and supports all EU attempts to de-escalate tensions in the region at international fora such as the UN, the OSCE and the Council of Europe.

Irish government supports EU enlargement to Turkey

Ireland is traditionally a supporter of EU enlargement, including to Turkey. During the Irish Presidency in 2013, progress was made on opening a new chapter in Turkey's accession negotiations and successive governments have consistently backed Turkey's eventual accession to the EU. At the level of public opinion, however, it is not clear to what extent the Irish population would support Turkish membership of the EU.

Links:

- Stephen Collins, [Gillmore tells Russian Ambassador of Ireland's deep concern over Ukraine action](#), 5 March 2014.
- Peter Flanagan, [Ireland's €637m export trade with Russia at risk over Ukraine crisis](#), 10 March 2014.
- Tánaiste Eamon Gilmore, [Irish Presidency marks milestone in EU relations with Turkey, Serbia and Kosovo](#), 25 June 2013.
- Tánaiste Eamon Gilmore, [on EU's Eastern Partnership Summit](#), 26 November 2013.
- Philip Ryan and Thomos Molloy, [Sanctions will hurt Ireland more than us, warns Russia](#), 19 March 2014.

3. Power relations in the EU

Ireland conscious of German leadership role

Ireland's relations with Germany have been consistently positive and friendly and Germany has been regarded as an ally of smaller states such as Ireland. The Irish Government and people recognise the pivotal role that Germany plays in the EU. Traditionally, German leadership in Europe was understood in the context of the Franco-German 'motor', but now, with the decline of France's influence, Germany's role has been further enhanced.

Amongst the general public, Chancellor Merkel is widely recognised and is considered to be a key leader in the EU and one of the decisive figures in Europe's response to the economic crisis. The Irish Prime Minister, Enda Kenny enjoys a close political relationship with Chancellor Merkel and, as

leaders of Christian Democratic parties, the two meet regularly on the margins of European Council summits.

On economic issues, Germany is seen as the principle advocate of stability and fiscal discipline in the EU. Germany's strong focus on consolidation and austerity during the economic crisis provoked some limited anti-German sentiment amongst the public at large, in particular as there was a view in Ireland that Germany itself was not deeply impacted by the crisis and perhaps did not appreciate the social implications of austerity for the Irish people.

The role of the German Constitutional Court in EU matters is of some importance in informed political and legal circles; however, the IIEA Working Group on Germany has noted a lack of detailed and nuanced understanding of German political and constitutional structures amongst the Irish media and the public.

Other aspects of Germany's European and foreign policy that attract attention in Ireland include Germany's strengthening relationship with Poland; Germany's position of supporting continued UK membership of the EU; and Germany's strong political and trade links with China.

Austerity vs. growth: A programme country perspective

Irish perspectives on the austerity vs. growth debate are strongly influenced by the country's experience of the EU-IMF programme and the austerity measures necessitated by it. The government entered the Troika programme in November 2010 when it was unable to borrow money on international markets at sustainable rates. The strictures of the programme gave rise to a feeling amongst many Irish people that austerity was imposed on the country by the IMF, the EU and, in some views, Germany.

The Irish people did not take to the street in large numbers to express anti-austerity views, as has been the case in other programme countries. There has been a strong reaction against a number of specific initiatives, including the introduction of a local property tax and residential water charges, and there was a small Occupy camp established outside the Central Bank from October 2011 until March 2012. However, these protests have not spilled over into mass anti-government or anti-austerity movements.

Citizens have registered their frustration at the ballot box. In February 2011 a general election was held which saw both of the outgoing coalition parties (Fianna Fáil and the Green Party) decimated and a new Fine Gael (centre-right) and Labour (centre-left) coalition enter government with a strong mandate to take the measures necessary to ensure Ireland's exit from the Troika programme as quickly as possible.

The period of the programme saw unemployment peak at 15.1 percent in February 2012 and on average 1,000 people emigrated per week between April 2012 and April 2013. The fulfilment of the terms of the programme, however, allowed Ireland to successfully exit the bailout without a precautionary credit line on-schedule in December 2013. The main focus of the debate has now switched to national and EU efforts to stimulate growth.

Austerity measures did provoke a negative response, towards the government and the EU, which explains, to a certain extent, the significant rise in the support for Sinn Féin and independent candidates in the May 2014 local and European elections. However, the challenges of the last five years have also stimulated entrepreneurship, in particular among young people.

In terms of preferred reform options at EU level, Ireland is a strong supporter of increased regulation and enhanced transparency in the financial services sector. The government prioritised making progress on banking supervision during its Presidency of the Council of the EU in the first half of 2013

and advocates the completion of a robust Banking Union. Ireland also has a preference for measures to stimulate growth and employment and has been active in the negotiation of the Youth Guarantee at EU level.

UK's relationship with the EU a cause for concern in Ireland

The possibility that the UK will leave the Union is a cause for some concern in Ireland. As the only country to share a land border with the UK, Ireland would perhaps be the EU Member State most directly affected by a UK exit from the Union. The trade and business relationship with the UK is extremely important to Ireland's economy. Barriers to trade between Ireland and the UK would be hugely damaging. Ireland would also lose an important liberal ally within the EU on priority issues ranging from taxation to free trade.

Moreover, close political cooperation between London and Dublin has proved to be crucial in maintaining peace and stability in Northern Ireland. There is therefore concern in Ireland that a UK withdrawal from the EU would impact the peace process in Northern Ireland, which remains quite fragile. Ireland's Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Tánaiste Eamon Gilmore T.D., warned in September 2013 that a UK withdrawal from the EU would be bad for British-Irish relations: 'I don't doubt that any consequences would be unintended, and that we would make every effort to mitigate them. But at best British detachment from Europe would slow and limit our efforts towards closer cooperation with each other. At worst it could reverse them'.

Links:

- Linda Barry, [Post-Presidency Review: Ireland's EU Presidency January-June 2013](#), 9 July 2013
- Tánaiste Eamon Gilmore TD, [Address to the British Irish Association](#), 7 September 2013
- James Kilcourse, [Britain Outside Europe? The Irish View](#), 30 January 2014
- Pádraig Murphy, [Germany's Place in the World](#), 20 December 2013
- Dáithí O'Ceallaigh and James Kilcourse, [Untying the Knot? Ireland, the UK and the EU](#), February 2013