

EU-28 WATCH



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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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1. Euroscepticism and the European Parliament Elections*UKIP dominates election campaign*

The key topic of the debate in the British European election campaign was the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and its generalized attack upon the British political establishment. European issues were an important component of this attack, but far from being its totality. Social issues, on which UKIP advocates generally conservative attitudes, also played a role in the party's campaign, as important as the party's main European theme, that of unrestricted immigration from Romania and Bulgaria. Until the very end of the campaign, most of UKIP's opponents contented themselves with attacks on what they regarded as the eccentric social and political views of numerous individual UKIP candidates, and made little effort to discuss European policy issues, with many Conservative candidates essentially agreeing with UKIP's views and many Labour candidates fearing that some of their electors shared UKIP's hostility to the European Union. The single exception to this pattern was the Liberal Democrats, who attempted to put a pro-EU case during the elections, but derived little electoral success from this decision. Since none of the main British parties supported the Spitzenkandidat of their political families, the existence of Spitzenkandidaten played no role in the electoral campaign. Some newspapers discussed the debates of the Spitzenkandidaten, but not in any sense as a matter of pressing concern for British electors. No public or political support has accrued in the United Kingdom to Mr. Juncker's candidature for the Presidency from his political grouping's now being the largest in the new European Parliament. Since the European elections, both UKIP and the Conservative Party have been criticized by their political opponents for the parties they seem likely to ally themselves with in Strasbourg.

Euroscepticism at the heart of European elections

For the reasons explained above, Euroscepticism was at the heart of the European elections in the United Kingdom. A central argument of Conservative candidates in these elections for not voting UKIP was that only their party could guarantee the holding of a European referendum after the general election in 2015. In this referendum, many members of the Conservative Party would certainly advocate a vote for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union. Towards the end of the campaign, a number of voices were raised within the Labour Party complaining that the Labour leadership had not taken sufficiently seriously the concerns of Labour electors which UKIP was exploiting successfully. These voices were divided between those advocating a more restrictive approach to European integration into the UK and those arguing for a more robust statement by the party's leadership of the economic benefits accruing to the United Kingdom from this immigration. The decision of the Liberal Democrat leader, Nick Clegg, to fight a determinedly pro-EU campaign was followed by an extremely poor result. Although this disappointing outcome for his party has many explanations, of which the unpopularity of the European Union in this country is probably not the most important, Mr. Clegg's position as leader of the Liberal Democrats has certainly not been strengthened

by his conduct of the European Elections and their result, in which the party lost eleven of its twelve MEPs.

In the United Kingdom, there is widespread distrust and disdain for the established political classes and great pessimism about the economic future of the country in the medium and long term. Living standards have at best stagnated for the past seven years and what improvement there has been has been concentrated in London and the South East. It is no coincidence that the worst result for UKIP in England took place in the London area, a result attributed by a UKIP spokeswoman to the high level of education in the capital. UKIP has succeeded in convincing a substantial minority of the British electorate that the European Union is an important contributor to the economic and social problems of the United Kingdom. UKIP was greatly helped in making this argument by the extremely negative image of the European Union presented to the British electorate over the past twenty years by wide sections of the British media, particularly the written media. At 34.2 percent, turnout in the European Elections of 2014 was down by 0.5 percent compared to 2009.

Links:

- BBC News, [Cameron guarantees EU referendum with Conservatives](#), 12 March 2014.
- Daniel Boffey and Lucy Fisher, [Ukip candidates add to Nigel Farage's woes with a barrage of racism](#), 26 April 2014.
- Tom McTague, [Ukip flops in London blaming the capital's 'educated, cultured and young' who live in a different country to everyone else](#), 23 May 2014.
- Patrick Wintour, [Clegg launches Lib Dems as pro-EU anti-Ukip party for European elections](#), 24 April 2014.

2. The EU's neighbourhood

Passive hostility towards Putin's Russia

The United Kingdom is one of the more geographically remote member states of the European Union from Russia. The issue of relations with Russia is therefore not one of central political concern to British voters. In so far as there is any coherent view of Russia in this country, it is one of suspicion and hostility towards Mr. Putin, allied with the acceptance that there is little the Western powers, let alone Britain acting on its own, can do to reintegrate the Crimea into the Ukraine. British public opinion would not wish to leave a free hand for Mr. Putin, but there is no call for military intervention to enforce this desire.

The considerations set out in the preceding paragraph also apply to the question of Ukraine. The view is sometimes expressed that the European Union behaved provocatively towards Russia in the later months of 2013 and the early months of 2014. The leader of UKIP, Nigel Farage, attracted comment, not all of it unfavourable, when he spoke of his admiration for the political effectiveness of Mr. Putin. In general, however, the British government has been happy to co-ordinate its approach to the Ukraine with that of its European partners. This attitude is entirely consistent with traditional British support for the mechanisms of the Eastern European Partnership. It should however be underlined that this Partnership is a matter of much less public interest and concern in the United Kingdom than in many continental European countries.

Decreasing support for Turkish EU membership

The British government has for a long time been an advocate of Turkish membership of the European Union. In this advocacy it was probably never reflecting public opinion in this country. Significantly, the recently adopted European Union Act, which prescribes referendums in the United Kingdom for all future major European treaties, does not envisage a referendum in the case of future proposed enlargements. During the European Elections, UKIP made immigration from Rumania and Bulgaria one of its major campaign themes. Any British government for the foreseeable future will think long and hard before presenting itself as an enthusiastic advocate of Turkish membership of the European Union. In so far as internal Turkish policy is followed in the British media, the image currently presented of the country tends to emphasize the supposedly authoritarian and Islamist aspects of Turkey's present rulers.

Links:

- William Hague, [Statement to Parliament](#), 18 March 2014.
- Press Association, [Nigel Farage: I admire Vladimir Putin](#), 31 March 2014.
- BBC News, , 28 April 2014.
- BBC News, [YouTube access restored in Turkey](#), 4 June 2014.

3. Power relations in the EU

No further British integration in an EU where Germany is dominant?

Germany is widely perceived in the United Kingdom as the dominant power of the European Union. This is not necessarily seen as a bad thing in itself, but German pre-eminence within the European Union is often cited as a reason for extreme caution towards possible British participation in deeper European integration. In joining the euro for instance, according to this argument, Britain would be ceding an important part of its economic sovereignty to a "reluctant hegemon" that may not know how to make good use of this hegemony, and may certainly exercise its hegemony in a way inimical to British interests.

An ambiguous position between growth and austerity policies

The consensus of economic commentators in the United Kingdom is that the Eurozone has too much favoured austerity compared with growth over the past five years. This is partly a matter of unreflective hostility towards the European Union and its institutions, and partly a matter of genuine economic analysis. There is a widespread view within the British economics profession that German economic policy has been excessively "mercantilist" in character and that the Eurozone as a whole would have benefitted from stronger resistance by Germany's partners to this over-simplified approach to economic policy. The discussion of this issue has however been complicated by the fact that the British government has claimed to pursue domestically a policy of austerity in recent years, but in fact has been very cautious in its approach to the reduction of public deficits and has recently taken specific measures to re-inflate the notoriously volatile British housing market. This, combined with Britain's absence from the Eurozone, has made it difficult for the British government to take an unambiguous position in the European debate between "austerity" and "growth." It has on the one hand sought to reinforce the case for its version of "austerity" by pointing to continental models. It has also however stressed the macroeconomic flexibility it has enjoyed through not being a member of the Eurozone.

Towards 'Brexit'?

What view the United Kingdom will take of British exit from the European Union is one of the great unresolved issues of current European and British politics. Much will depend on the result of the General election next year. Labour's present policy is not to hold a European referendum unless and until there is a new European treaty signed by the British government which entails significant further pooling of British sovereignty. No such treaty is at present in prospect. The Conservative Party on the other hand is committed to renegotiating the terms of British membership of the European Union and then putting the results of this renegotiation to a referendum by 2017 at the latest. It is very difficult to imagine that any such renegotiation will be sufficient to satisfy any substantial percentage of Mr. Cameron's deeply eurosceptic Conservative Party. If a re-elected Conservative government holds a European referendum before 2017, it must be assumed the great majority of the governing Conservative Party will be advocating at that stage a vote to leave the European Union.

Links:

- Ambrose Evans-Pritchard, [Recovery stalls in Europe as austerity grinds on](#), 15 May 2014.
- David Hughes, [Ed Miliband rules out EU referendum: Eurosceptics accuse Labour of 'shoddy compromise'](#), 12 March 2014.
- George Magnus, [The ECB promises much and delivers little](#), 04 June 2014.