

The European Parliament Elections and Israeli-EU Relations

Workshop Summary Herzliya, Israel; 12 June 2014

Following the May 2014 elections for the European parliament, the Mitvim Institute and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung convened an experts' workshop to analyze the election results and their impact on Israel-EU relations.

The workshop, facilitated by **Ms. Mireille Surowicz**, featured **Mr. Mark Gallagher** (Deputy Chief of Mission and Head of the Political Section, the European Union Delegation to Israel), **Ms. Avivit Bar-Ilan** (Director, Department for European Organizations, Europe Division, Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs), **Dr. Maya Sion-Tzidkiyahu** (The European Forum at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem), **Dr. Werner Puschra** (Director, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Israel), and **Dr. Nimrod Goren** (Chairman, Mitvim - The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies).

Dr. Maya Sion-Tzidkiyahu raised questions about the transformation of the EU parliament over the past six decades. It started as an assembly, with legislative power lying exclusively with the ministers at the EU council. Only gradually, during the 1980's and especially the 1990's it became a real parliament, with the power to amend and veto proposals. Nowadays you can consider the EU council as one house of parliament (representing national governments' interests) and the European Parliament itself as the second house (representing the citizens of the EU).

The growing power of the European Parliament has narrowed the democratic deficit in the EU, since its only directly-elected body has gained decision making power. But this has not narrowed the identity gap: the elites still want to advance the EU integration process forward, while the people are growing more and more Eurosceptic.

Furthermore, the nature of the elections may have changed. Past elections to the EU parliament were clearly "second order elections," meaning that people did not vote according to an EU agenda, but rather according to national agendas and as a protest vote against their national governments. In the 2014 elections, while

many people still made use of their vote as a way to express protest against their national leadership, there was also a convergence between the EU agenda and that of different member states. Since the economic crisis, the EU's influence on national economic agendas is on the rise, and this was evident in the elections, which were less "second order" than in the past.

The elections are not likely to have a big impact on EU-Israel relations. Many of the right-wing political groups in the European Parliament are actually quite pro-Israel. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that while Israel follows internal EU developments, there is no domestic policy debate in Israel on whether its interests would be better served by a more centralized pro-integration or by a looser Eurosceptic EU.

According to **Mark Gallagher**, the EU elections of 2014 were perceived as a Eurosceptic earthquake within Europe and in some ways as an election with no real winners. The Eurosceptic and more extreme right-wing parties gained strength, but 25% in the EU parliament is still less important than it would be in a national one. The pro-EU factions still have a significant majority. It is a concern though, that while extreme factions tend to moderate over time if they are in national governments, they might not have to do so in the EU, where they might be able to keep an independent spirit as an "eternal opposition".

What we may see in this new constellation is a de facto "grand coalition" between the two biggest factions: the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats. In both factions, Germany has a dominant position, although Italian MEPs are the most dominant group among the Social Democrats. Another possible change was signs that the European Conservatives and Reformists could overtake the Liberals as the third largest group in the European Parliament. At the time of the workshop, the different parties were undergoing a process of grouping into parliamentary factions and it remained to be seen how the newly-elected right-wing parties would position themselves.

In Israel the election got a lot of attention but unfortunately for the wrong reasons: Israelis are concerned about the rise of right-wing and anti-Semitic parties in Europe. While this is indeed concerning, one has to note that the right-wing parties differ widely regarding anti-Semitism. The right-wing party from the UK does not have such baggage, and even the Front National (France) has at least less than others. Also of concern for Israel is the European United Left-Nordic Green Left, because they are more pro-Palestinian. Another significant consequence of the elections for Israel will be who will chair the different committees, especially the foreign affairs committee.

All and all, Israelis have an inaccurate perception of Europe, exaggerating the faults and doing so even more after the 2014 elections because of the success of some anti-Semitic parties. At least a common Israeli perception that EU politics are increasingly shaped by radical Muslim agendas can now be wholeheartedly dismissed.

In **Dr. Werner Puschra**'s view, the 2014 EU elections have shown that Europe is currently at a crossroads. People are frustrated about how the political leaders had handled the economic crisis.

The south of the EU (plus France) has been converted into a zone of poverty, and the prosperity gap between the north and south is widening. This is partially due to Germany's disruptive influence of the economy in the south. The people are even more frustrated because they feel that their leaders do not know what to do about it. Only the Central Bank seems to still do things with confidence, but it is not a democratic body.

In light of this, it is not surprising that many Europeans did not vote, or voted for radical and populist parties. Hopefully they did so because they do not believe the parliament has a big impact anyway and not because they really support the ideas of these parties.

Puschra voiced criticism of the election campaigns because these campaigns offered no concept of what the EU should look like, what should be kept and what to change. They were largely undermined by populist arguments and were dominated by national concerns. This is also true regarding the candidates for the President of the European Commission ("vote for Martin Schulz, so we have a German as President of the Commission").

Europe stopped to be a social and solidarity union - but what is a political and economic union still worth without the former? The outcome of these elections will hopefully serve to make the political leaders more aware of what the people in the EU want: a social union, employment and social programs. Only this can once again stir pro-European sentiments.

In the EU-Israeli context, Puschra does not see much changes coming after the elections. The growing European frustration with Israel's policies is spreading not so much among the political elite in the EU, but more among its people and NGO sector. It remains to be seen how much influence they can exert.

Dr. Nimrod Goren focused on the EU's role in promoting the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. He suggested that the European Parliament, in its new composition, needs to put pressure on the next EU High Representative to re-establish the position of the EU Special Representative to the Middle East Peace Process, which was abolished by Cathrine Ashton.

Goren analyzed the new EU incentive for peace offered in December 2013 to Israel and the Palestinians, and the responses to it from various regional and international actors. This package offers Israel and the future state of Palestine a Special Privileged Partnership status within the EU after a peace agreement will be reached. This offer was one of the important new ideas put forth during the last round of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

While the EU sees this as an historic offer, a vast majority of Israelis are not aware of it at all. According to a March 2013 Mitvim Institute poll, 84% of Israelis have never heard of the EU offer, and a majority does not regard it as a sufficiently attractive reason to increase their support for the peace process.

Goren called on the European Parliament to continue promoting this incentive, despite the collapse of the recent round of peace negotiations. According to his analysis, the EU should work to further develop the actual content of the incentive package, with assistance from Israeli and European think tanks and parliamentarians.

He also suggested that the EU explore means to make the offer more attractive in Israeli eyes, and less technical in nature – perhaps by implying long-term prospects of EU membership for Israel in a post-conflict environment.

Lastly, Goren addressed the need for an effective EU marketing strategy that would convey to the Israeli and Palestinian publics, civil society and policy-makers what the offer actually means and how it would concretely benefit them.

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