

The European Parliament Elections Results: Possible Significance for Europe and Israel

June 2019

A policy roundtable on the 2019 European Parliament elections results and their possible significance for Europe and Israel took place on 30 May 2019 at Tel Aviv University. It was organized by the Israeli Association for the Study of European Integration (IASEI), Mitvim - The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies, the EU Studies Program at Tel Aviv University, and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. The event featured EU Ambassador to Israel H.E. Emanuele Giaufret, Ariel Shafransky and Noga Arbell from the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Maya Sion of IASEI, Dr. Nimrod Goren of the Mitvim Institute, former diplomat Eran Etzion, and Omer Gendler of the Open University.



Dr. Maya Sion-Tzidkiyahu Co-President of IASEI

In her opening remarks, Dr. Maya Sion-Tzidkiyahu noted that one of the more noticeable things about the European Parliament elections was the increase in voters' turnout. This, she said, was an indication of the politicization of the EU for the European citizens, both for those wanting more European integration and for the Euro-sceptics who wish for less integration. Among all crises the EU has gone through during the last decade, Brexit, she added, actually had a positive influence. It motivated EU citizens in the other Member States to be generally more supportive of their country's membership in the EU. While Eurosceptic parties did increase their share of votes in the elections, it was less than foreseen. Nevertheless, she concluded, Brussels should not ignore the challenge to the European project posed by far-right parties.

H.E. Emanuele Giaufret
Ambassador of the EU to Israel

H.E. Giaufret pointed out four main conclusions arising from the European Parliament elections: (1) the European project is alive and well, and there is renewed interest in the European project. Voter turnout in the elections has increased in almost all Member States; (2) there is a debate in the EU on what Europe is and what is the role of Member States, but the elections showed that there is still a broad agreement that EU membership is a good thing for Europe's citizens; (3) the elections have been very important to the process of creating a common European political space; (4) pro-European forces were the winners of the European Parliament elections, and this trend is very clear. He also touched upon the future of Israel-Europe relations. Israel was not a big topic of the elections campaign, which focused on issues such as the rule of law, climate change, environment, and migration. Still, he said, Israel and the EU remain interlinked. While there are calls in Israel to "give up on Europe", H.E. Giaufret does not see this as a feasible option. As an example, he made reference to Israel's natural gas findings, noting that it is Europe – not the US nor China – who will be the eventual consumer of the gas that Israel will be able to export. The EU cannot give up on Israel, and Israel cannot give up on the EU.

Omer Gendler
The Open University

Omer Gendler identified the major trends emerging from the European Parliament elections, first and foremost the move from a two-party system to one of smaller, multiple parties. This means that in the new European Parliament, the two major parties – the EPP and S&D – will not have the majority anymore, and that new and diverse actors will have a more significant say in decision making. He added that while this loss of majority is perceived as an unexpected event, it is – in practice – the culmination of a long-lasting trend. Over the last twenty years, the major parties have been losing power in domestic politics within EU Member States. Gendler noted that the fact that Eurosceptic parties won in three out of the four largest EU Member States reflects anti-government sentiments in the UK and France, while in Italy the anti-EU vote reflected the mood set by the ruling government. Despite this, he said, more pro-European parties will be part of the next European Parliament coalition -- in the face of growing divisions between Member States on matters of national interest. Pro- and anti-EU attitudes are also influenced to a great extent by divisions between center and periphery within each country. In conclusion, Gendler noted that election results in the UK indicate that the party that will benefit the most from Brexit, due to the departure of British members from the European Parliament, will be the EPP. In light of this and of the above-mentioned loss of majority, the EPP may toughen its position against a postponement of Brexit.

Noga Arbell
Center for Policy Research, MFA

Noga Arbell spoke of the analytical level at which the elections results should be understood. It would be incorrect, she noted, to assess the results along a single right-to-left, or even center-to-extreme axis. Instead, she said, the outcome should be read simultaneously in at least two dimensions: "more vs. less Europe" axis, as well as a "universalists vs. nationalists" axis. Interestingly, there is very little change between the opposite sides of either axis but there are significant shifts between the political groups which make up each side. It is also important to note, said Arbell, that the "less Europe" camp is made up mostly of parties that wish to change the EU, not exit it completely (the UK being an obvious exception to this rule). Arbell stressed that the "translation" of these results to tangible political power is not at all clear cut: Though support for the two main traditional political groups has dropped below 50 percent for the first time in EU history, the "more Europe" camp still enjoys overwhelming popular support and will most likely be making up the next coalition. She highlighted that fewer Member States will be represented in this coalition and even fewer incumbent governments. Most of the universalists support deeper integration, while most of the nationalists oppose it. As a result, claimed Arbell, though the nationalists won more seats in the elections, the "more Europe" coalition that will most likely be formed will strengthen the universalists. Moreover, Arbell pointed out that while the EPP is expected to be the biggest political group in the new parliament, it will probably find itself in a minority on many issues within the incoming coalition (environmental and agricultural policy, for starters).

Ariel Shafransky
Director of the Department for Multilateral European Organizations, MFA

Ariel Shafransky spoke of the challenges facing Israel in light of the European Parliament elections. Israel will have to confront the new reality in the European Parliament (more fragmented, not dominated by the EPP and S&D, and with conflicting agendas among the different parties and groups) like every other Member State or non-EU country, he said. For Israel, work within the European Parliament is more complex as there are elements in the Parliament who would not talk to Israel, and others (for example, AFD and FPÖ), with whom Israel does not talk. Shafransky cautioned, that the EU is not viewed very positively by the Israeli public, and should segments within the new European Parliament focus on issuing critical statements, or moves, regarding Israel, this will have further negative impact on how Israel and Israelis relate to the EU and to Israel's relations with it. Nevertheless, Israel did not give up on the EU, and its practical relations and cooperation with the EU run deep and wide. The question is in which fields these relations can be further advanced and how, given that the EU is currently not enabling an upgrade of bilateral ties because of linkage to the Palestinian issue. Israel will remain of interest to Europe, and vice versa, as it is relevant to issues that both side consider important, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Iran.

Eran Etzion**Former Head of Policy Planning at the MFA and Deputy Head of the NSC**

Eran Etzion noted that voters in Israel and the EU are moving to the center, which itself is moving to the right. Voting outcomes in both places are becoming more and more fluid, as exemplified by the decline of establishment parties and the rise of new political forces. At the same time, he noted, voters are exhausted, overloaded and confused in the age of fake news and disinformation; politics is becoming extremely personalized; and the domestic and international dimensions of policy and politics have become mixed to unprecedented levels. Differences between the Israeli and European elections are evident in: (1) opposite trends regarding voter turnout – an increase in Europe, compared to an expected decrease in Israel's upcoming elections; (2) priority issues for the electorate – immigration, terrorism, economics and climate change were central in the European elections, but not in the Israeli one; (3) view of the Trump administration, which is positive in Israel and much less so in Europe. Israelis are drifting apart from the EU, and seem to be giving up on it. On the other hand, Israel is currently of less importance to the EU than it was in the past. Etzion also presented recommendations going forward. First, he suggested, an effort needs to be made in Israel and the EU to battle the fake news phenomenon and the rise nationalism. Furthermore, he said, more voice needs to be given to the public in decision-making and democratic processes. He also mentioned the need to strengthen institutions in order to exemplify that not all is personal in politics, and advocated stronger cooperation between pro-democracy forces in Europe and Israel.

Dr. Nimrod Goren**Head of the Mitvim Institute**

Discussing the implications of the elections on Israel, Dr. Nimrod Goren said that these will become more evident following the appointment of a new Commission President and High Representative. Goren said that Israel should view the EU as a partner and friend – even if a critical one – rather than as a foe, and that it should stop inciting against the EU and instead share with the public the wide range and depth of Israeli-European cooperation. The hopes within the Israeli right that European far-right actors who are less critical toward Israel's policies will succeed in changing the EU from within did not materialize in the elections, he added, noting that this is a positive development. A strong European project with a diversity of parties and voices supporting it and with a majority strongly committed to liberal democracy should be seen as serving Israel interests, he said. Speaking of the efforts of populist leaders in Israel and Europe in coming to each other's aid in their respective elections, Goren said that those in the liberal democratic camp would do well to follow suit, and advised the EU to step up its support for Israeli pro-peace and pro-democracy civil society groups. Goren recommended that Israel should welcome European involvement in efforts to advance Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking rather than trying to marginalize it. The EU, meanwhile, should reaffirm its commitment to principles and parameters for Israeli-Palestinian peace, since the lack of such reaffirmation leads Israeli politicians to doubt whether the EU is still committed to the topic. Goren called on the EU to take more pro-active initiatives to advance peace, rather than wait for the Trump plan to be published.