

**Titel:**

“With or without EU”: The Radical Left at the proof of the 2019 European elections

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**Kurzzusammenfassung**

In the 2019 election, the Radical Left at the European level suffered internal tensions between Eurosceptics and anti-capitalists on the one hand and proponents of an attempt to build an alternative leftist narrative of European integration on the other hand. The organizational fragmentation – between the Party of the European Left, the Nordic Green Alliance, and the two recently born movements DiEM25 and Now the People – and the nomination of two low-profile leading candidates further weakened the left parties. As a result, the GUE/NGL group has become smaller and more heterogeneous.

**Schlagworte**

Radical Left, GUE/NGL, European Left, Nordic Green Left Alliance, European Election 2019

**1. Introduction**

The Radical Left (RL) representation at the European level is multifaceted and changes depending on whether we refer to the party or to the institutional sphere. Its main political party at the European level is the Party of the European Left (EL). In addition to that, representation is provided by the Nordic Green Alliance, gathering eco-socialists MEPs coming from northern and Scandinavian countries, and by two recently born movements: DiEM25 and Now the People. Within the European Parliament (EP), the RL is represented by the Confederal Group of the European United Left–Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL). Its creation derives from the political action of the EL and of the NGL and its roots can be found in the communist group that was first established within the EP in 1973 by the efforts of the Italian and French Communist Party (PCI, PCF) as well as of the Danish Socialistisk Folkeparti (SF) (Bell 1998).

In 2009, due in particular to the collapse of the Italian delegation (Calossi 2011), the RL reached the lowest support (in terms of parliamentary representation) in its history. The downturn ended with the 2014 elections, when, in the midst of the financial crisis and the violent demonstrations

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against the Troika and austerity measures, the group substantially increased its score (from 4.76% to 6.92%), passing from 35 to 52 seats and becoming the fifth group in size. This substantial increase mainly derived from the impressive score recorded in some of the countries where the crisis struck more severely: the Greek Syriza, whose leader Alexis Tsipras was appointed Spitzenkandidat, passed from 13.0% to 32.6% of the votes, the Spanish Podemos from 3.8% to 10.0% and the Irish Sinn Féin from 2.8% to 17.0%.

At the eve of the 2019 European election, the RL at the European level was represented in the EP by 52 MEPs coming from 14 member states and 19 national political parties, 3 of which were in government: Syriza, with a (sitting) Prime Minister, and the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) and Bloco de Esquerda (BE), which both belonged to the government coalition (Izzo 2014). In the midst of one of the most crucial moments in the history of the EU, this chapter aims at assessing both how the RL at the European level performed in the 2019 European election and how it dealt with the different political tendencies co-existing within its field, which range from leftist euro-scepticism and anti-capitalism to the attempt to build an alternative leftist narrative within the path of European integration.

## **2. Between eurosceptic tensions and divisive tendencies: the path towards the 2019 election**

The European election held from May 23<sup>rd</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> 2019 were considered by many experts to be crucial for the future of the European Union. The rise of nationalists, populists and eurosceptic parties throughout Europe transformed the vote into a contest between those in favour of pursuing the process of European integration and those who would put a to stop to it. The same tension between the two poles was also clearly observable within the leftist field at the European level, which, at the eve of the elections, displayed a very fragmented situation. Differently from the 2014 election, in fact, the EL was not the only relevant electoral recipient for the leftist national parties across Europe. Following the refusal by the EL to expel Syriza from the party, in April 2018 Jean-Luc Mélenchon (France Insoumise, FI), Pablo Iglesias (Podemos), and Catarina Martins (BE) signed a joint declaration launching the construction of a European movement, called “Now the People” with the aim to run for the European election (Martins et al. 2018).

The choice of these parties of working together outside the EL highlighted the divergences existing within the European leftist field around the question of whether progressive policy is possible within the framework of the EU. In fact, if in general all the leftist forces across Europe shared the same vision of the EU treaties as the basis for the neoliberal austerity policies and

therefore agreed on their revision, divisions raised on whether the treaties should be scrapped all together or not (Bierbaum 2019). In particular, the debate developed between those proposing to put forward progressive policy on the basis of the existing treaties by interpreting them differently and, on the other hand, those who proposed to simply disobey them, as exemplified by the “Plan B hypothesis” on exiting the Euro put forward by Mélenchon (Mélenchon et al. 2015).

A further element of division across the leftist field during the 2019 electoral campaign was constituted by the presence of DiEM25, the pan-European movement created and led by former Greek finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis, which ran for the European elections in cooperation with other parties and movements<sup>2</sup> under the name *European Spring*. The fact that DiEM25 occupied the same political field, but on a complete different platform (its goal was to put in place a transnational political party in an attempt to Europeanise the political debate), created tensions on the political ground as it had the potential to foster the existing divisions and weaken even more the field of the RL in Europe. In the end, however, DiEM25’s impact on the leftist political debate as well as on EL’s final score ended to be not too significant due to the poor results obtained.

All in all, the inability for the left at the EU level to sort out these tensions led to a fundamental incoherence among the leftist parties across Europe and to a high degree of fragmentation in terms of political offer (Baier 2019). This structural deficiency, in turn, strongly reverberated in the choice of the two leading candidates (*Spitzenkandidaten*), which took place on January 26-27<sup>th</sup>, 2019 at the meeting of the EL’s Executive Board in Brussels. The reasons behind the choice of Violeta Tomić, Member of the Slovenian Parliament, and Nico Cue, former Secretary General of the Metalworkers’ Union of Belgium, are manifold. First of all, the party followed a “gender balanced criterion” which went along with the willingness to give representation both to the Eastern and Western parts of the EU (Interview A). Moreover, in the case of Tomić, the party also wanted to highlight the situation of the Slovenian member party Levica, which had scored very well in the previous national elections and was expected to elect representatives in the EU hemicycle (Interview B).

At the same time, the two candidates were clearly less known and *politically weaker* than both their competitors and their predecessor, former Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras. Several reasons explain the low profile of the two candidates. One of them is the lack of strong personalities

<sup>2</sup> French “Génération.s”, Polish “Razem”, German “Demokratie in Bewegung”, Italian “Democrazia Autonoma”, Portuguese “Livre”, and Danish “Alternativet”.

linked to the EL in government positions or within the European institutions, as had been the case with Tsipras (Interview A). Because of the lack in the EU of a fully-fledged pan-European public opinion and political space, a true *EU political rockstar* could only emerge among those already very popular at the national level, especially in the biggest countries. The evident weakness of the EL in this sense certainly hampered the search for an effective Spitzenkandidat (Interview A). A second reason behind the choice of low profile candidates by the EL can also be traced in the EL's internal weakness, the latter mainly deriving, in turn, from the profound divisions above-described and from a lack of guidance from the part of its two main national delegations, Die Linke and Syriza (Interview B). The lack of a solid and authoritative guide in the process of selection of a strong leading candidate certainly influenced the final outcome. Finally, another important weakening factor was the fact that a consistent part of the EL opposed the Spitzenkandidaten system as such and therefore watered down the selection process (Interview B).

In turn, both the divisions and the low-profile leading candidates further weakened the leftist field as a whole and led to an increased nationalization of the electoral campaign with respect to the 2014 elections. In this sense “the choice of a strong and well known leader could have been very helpful in order to establish a link between the various factions composing the Left at European level, to provide more coherence in terms of political offer and to unite the sparse factions at the national level” (Interview B). An example in this sense is the case of Alexis Tsipras in Italy in 2014, when all the small and divided leftist lists gathered around the same political subject called “L'altra Europa con Tsipras” (The Other Europe with Tsipras) succeeding to pass the 4% electoral threshold. Nothing similar emerged in 2019.

### **3. A progressive agenda for a new Europe: the European Left manifesto for the 2019 election**

Despite the divisions, on January 26-27<sup>th</sup> 2019, at the meeting of its Executive Board, the EL put forward its election manifesto (European Left 2019). The text maintained a balanced stance between the two internal poles above mentioned, however clearly remaining into the *European field*. The two main pillars of the manifesto were anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism. According to the EL, the problems behind the recent EU crisis were to be found within the EU's neo-liberal structure, which had worsened imbalances and inequalities, undermining, at the same time, workers' rights and welfare policies. Moreover, according to the manifesto, the crisis and the lack of effective answers had increased the lack of trust in democratic institutions

and enabled the rise of far right parties, which in turn fostered fear and promoted a “more racist and xenophobic EU” (p. 5).

In order to stop and put an end to this situation, the EL proposed a “new model of economic and social development” (p. 6), which included economic propositions that broke with the EU framework, such as the end of ECB’s independence and the inclusion of employment goals in its statute, the “abolition of the fiscal pact and [the] ending [of] austerity plans” (p. 7), a different use of the EU budget in aiming at more redistribution, and a more democratic control of the financial market.

On environmental issues, the EL marked its difference from the European Greens by linking them to the underlying anti-capitalist narrative of its political offer, describing environmental problems as the result of the distortive nature of capitalism. To tackle this issue the EL proposed “a new model for ecological development”, a plan that “rejects the dominant unsustainable production and the consumeristic model” (p. 8-9). Emphasis in this sense was given to a more democratic access to natural resources, impeding their privatization. More concretely, the manifesto proposed the re-localisation of industrial production in Europe, the improvement of public transports and the fight against the currently used market solutions to carbon emissions such as the EU Emission Trading System (ETS).

A third important theme touched by the manifesto were civil and social rights, in order to give back “power to the people” and build “a Europe of rights and liberties” (p. 10-11). Concerning social rights, the manifesto highlighted some of the classic leftist points, such as the necessity to strengthen collective bargaining and more freedom to trade unions. At the EU level, the manifesto proposed the introduction of a social protocol in the EU treaties. Concerning civil rights, the manifesto reaffirmed the need to defend the rights of children, elderly people and LGBTQI persons. Moreover, the manifesto upheld the necessity to guarantee migrants and asylum seekers rights while reforming the Dublin system and creating European humanitarian corridors.

#### **4. The results: a clear step back for the radical left at the European level**

The final results constituted a step back for GUE/NGL in comparison to the past election. The aggregate score revealed a decrease from the 6.92% of the votes in 2014 to 5.06% in 2019, the third worst score after the 1994 (4.94%) and 2009 elections (4.76%). This result reverberated even more in terms of seats. GUE/NGL went from 52 seats to 41, a decrease of more than a fifth, leaving GUE/NGL as the smallest group in the hemicycle.

Looking in more detail at the result disaggregated by country (table 1), the picture becomes clearer. GUE/NGL decreased its score in 9 of the 14 countries that had elected at least one MEP in 2014. The losses were particularly significant in Greece, where Syriza decreased by 8.83 percentage points and in Czechia, where KSČM lost 4.06 percentage points. Other significant cases can be observed in Italy (-2.29 percentage points), Finland (-2.40) and The Netherlands (-2.21). The percentage decrease also reflects on the number of MEPs elected. With the exception of Greece, where Syriza elected the same number of MEPs, particularly significant are the cases of the delegations from Spain, which lost 5 MEPs, Italy (from 3 MEPs to 0), Czechia (from 3 to 1 MEP) and the Netherlands (from 3 MEPs to 1). The German Die Linke also decreased by 2 MEPs.

By contrast, the increases were limited in number and in size. In this sense, the most notable results were the score of 8.06% obtained by the Belgian PTB-PVDA, which meant an increase of 5.09 percentage points and one seat, the score of 8.80% by the French delegation, where Mélenchon's FI strongly contributed to the increase of 2.50 percentage points and 2 seats, and that of the Irish delegation, which did not however result in any additional MEP. Other than these increases, GUE/NGL held up in a number of countries that performed well also in 2014. This is the case of Portugal, where the BE, together with the Coligação Democrática Unitária (CDU), slightly increased the already remarkable result of 2014 and maintained its 4 MEPs delegation unaltered. The same is true for Cyprus, where AKEL slightly improved the already very high score of 2014 and kept the 2 MEPs elected in 2014.

**Table 1:** GUE/NGL's electoral results between 2014 and 2019 by country

Country	Votes 2014	Votes 2019	Diff.	Seats 2014	Seats 2019	Diff.
Austria	/	/	/	/	/	=
Belgium	3.51%	8.60% <sup>*1</sup>	+5.09	/	1	+1
Bulgaria	/	/	/	/	/	=
Croatia	/	/	/	/	/	=
Cyprus	26.90%	27.49%	+0.59	2	2	=
Czechia	11.00%	6.94%	-4.06	3	1	-2
Denmark	8.00%	9.21% <sup>*2</sup>	+1.21	1	1	=
Estonia	/	/	/	/	/	=
Finland	9.30%	6.90%	-2.40	1	1	=
France	6.30%	8.80% <sup>*3</sup>	+2.50	4	6	+2
Germany	7.40%	6.90% <sup>*4</sup>	-0.50	8	6	-2
Greece	32.60%	23.77%	-8.83	6	6	=
Hungary	/	/	/	/	/	=
Ireland	17.00%	34.81% <sup>*5</sup>	+17.81	4	4	=
Italy	4.03%	1.74%	-2.29	3	/	-3

Latvia	/	/	/	/	/	=
Lithuania	/	/	/	/	/	=
Luxembourg	5.70%	4.84%	-0.86	/	/	=
Malta	/	/	/	/	/	=
Netherlands	9.60%	7.39%* <sup>6</sup>	-2.21	3	1	-2
Poland	/	/	/	/	/	=
Portugal	17.20%	17.97%* <sup>7</sup>	+0.77	4	4	=
Romania	/	/	/	/	/	=
Slovakia	/	/	/	/	/	=
Slovenia	8.10%	6.43%	-1.67	/	/	=
Spain	18.01%* <sup>8</sup>	10.07%	± -7.94	11	6	-5
Sweden	5.70%	6.80%	+1.10	1	1	=
U.K	0.60%	0.62%	+0.02	1	1	=
Total				<b>52</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>-11</b>

Notes: \*1: PTB-PVDA: 5.57%; PVDA-PTB: 3.03% ; \*2: Enhedslisten: 5.51%; Folkebevægelsen mod EU: 3.70% ; \*3: France Insoumise: 6.31%; PCF: 2.49% ; \*4: Die Linke: 5.50%; Tierschutzpartei: 1.40% ; \*5: Luke Flanagan (independent candidate): 15.74%; Sinn Féin: 11.68%; Independents 4 Change: 7.39% ; \*6: PvdD: 4.02%; SP: 3.37% ; \*7: Bloco de Esquerda: 10.56; Coligação Democrática Unitária: 7.41 ; \*8: Izquierda Unida (IU+ICV): 10.03%; Podemos: 7.98%.

**Source:** Calculation by the author. <https://election-results.eu/european-results/2019-2024/>. Accessed: 3. December 2019

All in all, it is clear that the overall poor result of GUE/NGL mainly derived from its incapacity to score well in the bigger countries, where it is easier to gain seats without a very high score. With the exception of France, in all the other founding countries GUE/NGL parties witnessed a decrease in their score and size of delegation, with the Italians even cancelling their presence in Strasbourg. In this sense, the good results obtained in Belgium and Ireland, together with the holding up in Cyprus and Portugal were not enough in order to form a numerous group in the EP. A third factor to highlight is the still ongoing, chronic absence of GUE/NGL in Eastern Europe. With the exception of Czechia (which diminished its presence from 3 MEPs to only 1), no other country of the former Eastern bloc elected any MEP for GUE/NGL. At the end of the day, this shortcoming of course accounts for the difference in seats between GUE/NGL and the rest of the political groups, which were more capable to gain consistent consensus across Europe.

## **5. GUE/NGL's new conformation: smaller, fragmented and ideologically more heterogeneous**

As shown in table 2, the final GUE/NGL delegation resulting from the first constitutive plenary session is made of 41 MEPs elected in 14 EU countries and 19 different national parties. It is

interesting to notice how, in terms of number of national parties represented, this is the first time since 1979 that the RL faced a negative tendency within the EP. The “country representation” index, displayed in table 2, has remained the same since 2014 (50%) whereas the number of national parties represented decreased by 3 units, with respect to the past constitutive session. The biggest delegations are the Greek, Spanish, German and the French ones, all of them totalling 6 MEPs, whereas, after the decrease of 2 MEPs by the German Die Linke, the largest single national party has now become the Greek Syriza, which maintained the 6 MEPs elected in 2014. Finally, the gender representation inside the group has diminished by about 8 percentage points, passing from 51.92% to 43.90%.

**Table 2:** GUE/NGL “state of health” at the constitutive sessions in 2014 and 2019

	<b>2014</b>	<b>2019</b>
<b>N. of parties</b>	23	19
<b>Countries represented</b>	14/28 (50%)	14/28 (50%)
<b>Share of MEPs belonging to the largest delegation</b>	7/52 (13.46%)	6/41 (14.63%)
<b>Share of MEPs belonging to the two largest delegations</b>	13/52 (25%)	12/41 (29.26%)
<b>Women representation</b>	27/52 (51.92%)	18/41 (43.90%)

**Source:** Calculation by the author. <https://election-results.eu/european-results/2019-2024/>. Accessed: 3. December 2019

If we compare these results with the other groups in the hemicycle, the “fragmented” and heterogeneous constitution of the group is even more apparent. As shown in table 3, the lowest number of MEPs, in fact, is at the same time accompanied by a relatively high number of national delegations, which makes the group the one with the lowest ratio of MEPs per national delegation. The fragmented nature of the new group is also observable through the level of party concentration, measured by the share of MEPs belonging to the largest and the two largest national delegations in the group (cf. Calossi 2011). Taking into consideration the two larger delegations, GUE/NGL displays a percentage that is only above the two main groups and largely lower than the rest of the groups. This score increases if we take into account only the largest delegation in each group. In this case, GUE/NGL displays the lowest figure in the hemicycle, even lower than the main groups. Finally, even if GUE/NGL does not excel in terms of country representation (50%, second lower score), it does perform well in terms of gender representation displaying the third highest score in the hemicycle, close to RE and better than the two main groups.

**Table 3:** “State of health” of political groups at the constitutive session in 2019

	<b>EPP</b>	<b>S&amp;D</b>	<b>RE</b>	<b>ECR</b>	<b>Greens</b>	<b>ID</b>	<b>GUE/NGL</b>
<b>N. of MEPs</b>	182	154	108	62	74	73	<b>41</b>
<b>N. of parties</b>	41	31	32	16	24	9	<b>20</b>
<b>MEPs/deleg.</b>	4.43	4.96	3.37	3.87	3.08	8.11	<b>2.02</b>
<b>Countries represented</b>	92.85%	92.85%	78.57%	53.57%	57.14%	32.14%	<b>50%</b>
<b>Share of largest delegation</b>	29/182 (15.93%)	20/154 (19.98%)	21/108 (19.44%)	26/62 (41.93%)	25/74 (33.78%)	28/73 (38.35%)	<b>6/41 (14.63%)</b>
<b>Share of two largest delegations</b>	46/182 (25.27%)	39/154 (25.32%)	38/108 (35.18%)	31/62 (50.00%)	37/74 (85.00%)	50/73 (68.49%)	<b>12/41 (29.26%)</b>
<b>Women</b>	34.06%	42.85%	47.22%	32.25%	62.90%	38.35%	<b>43.90%</b>

**Source:** European Parliament 2019, calculations by the author

The fragmentation observable through the numbers is also present inside the group in terms of ideological heterogeneity. The group includes many and different points of view (Interview B) ranging from the more pro-European Podemos, Syriza and Die Linke to the more Eurosceptic Bloco de Esquerda and La France Insoumise, to the Irish republicans and the greener Scandinavian MEPs. This strong fragmentation and heterogeneity, along with the reduced numbers in the hemicycle put the group in a difficult situation, where the risk of being marginalized and unable to affect the debate and the parliamentary outcome is very high.

In this situation the group appears to face two options for the future. One is to accept this marginalization and act critically, as a true parliamentary opposition, distinguishing itself from the choices made by the *von der Leyen majority*. This strategy would require a radical and alternative platform in order to obtain visibility at the European level and allow the EL to regain its lost consensus (Interview A). On the other hand, GUE/NGL’s strategy could aim at still influencing the debate and the EP’s output, at least on a few central issues, by exploiting the lack of a real *government – opposition* scheme inside the EP. This however would require strong coherence, the emerging of a strong personality who can embody the Group’s position and build up a strong network of relations and alliances with other groups to be included in the debates and affect the decision making (Interview B).

## 6. Conclusions

As outlined in this chapter, the RL at the European level faces a crucial moment in its history. As outlined in the first paragraph, the group started out as a Communist faction inside the EP, and found its current form in 1994 under a new political framework that helped it to grow in terms of MEPs and pluralism. The road to the 2019 European election has been characterized

by divisions and the choice of two very low-profile leading candidates, factors that all led to a more national and disarticulated electoral campaign. The low score is in turn a reflection of the several struggles faced by the EL during the campaign in the effort (as shown by the common manifesto) to find a synthesis between anti-capitalistic, pro-European and green stances. The new GUE/NGL group is small and heterogeneous, with no dominant factions and a persistent problem of representation within the Eastern bloc. It is to be seen whether this heterogeneity will display itself in positive terms (more pluralism and political richness) or whether it will endanger the cohesion of the group by fostering further fragmentation and weakening its position within the European Parliament.

## Interviews

Interview A: Vice-President of the Party of the European Left. Brussels, October 28<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

Interview B: Member of the Executive Board of the Party of the European Left. Brussels, October 28<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

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