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## EUROPEAN ELECTIONS: EURO-OPTIMISM GOES EAST?

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When the decision about shifting the election date to the European Parliament to May was taken, an exceptional opportunity for the party campaigners in the Central and Eastern Europe seemed to arise. It had to be a relatively easy task to combine the stocktaking of the decade of EU membership with the positive narrative as to the future (mainly domestic) challenges, with the politicians ensuring to be the only ones able to properly cope with them and find the right answers. Almost all political parties with government experience since the democratic breakthrough in 1989 could have subscribed to such a narrative highlighting their contribution, be it during negotiations or after accession. A campaign more ‘Europeanized’ than this could not to be expected. Bearing in mind the traditional voters inclination to treat the election to the European Parliament as a second order national election, such circumstances seemed to guarantee a sure hit, definitely in Poland where, according to surveys (e.g. PEW Research), the society is truly committed to the European Union and the favorable view of the European institutions remains dominant.

As it turned out, however, all these comfortable assumptions failed – just confirming the old wisdom ascribed to Harold Macmillan. The harsh confrontation with the events in Ukraine showed that the game were

changing entirely, and as a unavoidable result, the national security issue gained a prominent position in the parties’ communication strategies towards the electorate.

What was particularly striking, however, was the new security component of the – frankly speaking not particularly vivid - national debate on the Eurozone accession. Besides the usual economic and political deliberation, another argument has been raised, based on the observation of the differences in the solidarity levels within the EU and the Eurozone. In this context, the attitude to the accession of Poland to the Eurozone came to resemble the mindset of the Baltic States, which strived with determination for the common currency adoption following security considerations. As explicitly stated by Minister Radosław Sikorski in his address to the Parliament on 8 May 2014 in the annual presentation of the goals of the Polish foreign policy in 2014, the developments in Ukraine should mobilize Poland for faster integration with the Eurozone. Nevertheless, the short-term improvement of the public attitude towards euro accession remains rather doubtful.

The key question is whether one could expect an increased willingness to go to the polls under the current



exceptional circumstances. It is a huge challenge in terms of input legitimacy in the Central and Eastern Europe. The results in the previous ballots were disastrous even against the background that in the whole Europe the turnout has continuously worsened since 1979. So third time lucky? Not a chance. This limited voters participation should not however be interpreted as a simple projection of the disappointment at the EU as such. Indeed, as the recent Eurobarometer survey “Europeans in 2014” indicates, respondents in V4 countries tend to trust the EU above the EU average, although still the majority claim the opposite. More relevant could be the critical assessment of the prospects for national economy, where only Poland has achieved a result above the value for the whole EU, while Slovaks in particular expressed their unease. Furthermore, when asked about the future of the European Union, the CEE societies declared level of optimism similar to what was measured for the EU as a whole. Also here, the Poles stand out with the value of 70% of “optimistic” declarations in comparison to the 53% for the whole EU. Therefore, while analyzing and interpreting the turnout in the election to the European Parliament, the pro-European Poland could be labeled – because of its previous and expected low voter participation (21% in 2004, 25% in 2009) – as a ‘non-practising believer’. There is no doubt: for the overwhelming majority of the society there is no alternative to being nested within the Western integration structures. One could conclude that the increasingly questioned idea of output legitimacy remains valid in this part of Europe. However, the assessment of the post-1989 transformation must also be taken into account here. In general, respondents in the Visegrád Group countries are most often convinced that the system was worth changing. However, the comparative survey conducted earlier this year by CBOS,

FOCUS, CVVM and TÁRKI shows that while in Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia the majority of residents is in favour of the transformation (71%, 63% and 56% respectively), the picture in Hungary differs. In this country, the changes are supported by a significant minority of the population (48%). Consequently, the way the EU had influenced and support the transformation efforts on the path towards EU accession could be reflected in societies’ attitudes.

Bearing in mind this transformative impact of the EU, the fact that the presidential election in Ukraine is scheduled for the day when most of the EU member states hold the election to the EP is remarkably symbolic. The coincidence emphasizes the extent to which tough economic circumstances have made the ground for an active policy towards the neighbourhood less fertile. The external perception of Eurozone turbulence and its social impact have weakened the soft power of the Union. Additionally, the bloc’s narrow focus on stability has undermined the credibility of the Union as a normative actor in some quarters. With the escalating crisis in Ukraine the European external performance has been put to the stress test of immense implications. Poland, which has proven that a successful transformation is feasible and is willing to share such positive experience, will advocate for an active approach to the ENP. If the EU’s Eastern and the Southern neighbourhoods are to remain engaged, the encouragement for re-commitment from all EU member states is desperately needed. Hopefully, the new incumbents at key institutional functions will step into the breach with the ambition to improve the EU’s capability to respond to external challenges. This would be the only way for the Union not only to regain its power of induction (Garton Ash), but also to serve its own security.