'Alarming' rise in support for far-right European parties

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News

MEPs must push ahead with European policies of 'solidarity, equality and wellbeing' to end 'dangerous escalation' of far-right, argues Sarah Isal.

The elections that took place across Europe in May come as a stark reminder that we cannot continue to be complacent in the face of the surge of parties propagating racist and xenophobic ideas and policies.

There has been an alarming 50 per cent increase of the far-right in these elections, compared to the previous European elections in 2009, with 79 MEPs from these parties within the new European parliament. When there is such support for racist and xenophobic parties, it should set alarm bells ringing for mainstream parties and for society at large.

In France in particular, the Front National gained the largest number of votes, winning about a third of the total number of French seats. Other countries with high support for xenophobic parties include the United Kingdom (UKIP), Denmark (Danish People's Party) and Austria's Freedom Party (FPÖ).

These elections will also see the entry of outright neo-Nazi parties into the European parliament, including the Greek Golden Dawn, Jobbik in Hungary and the German National Democratic Party.

There is a strong likelihood that these MEPs may establish one or more political groups in the European parliament. This would entitle them to receive public EU money and give them more influence, such as the possibility to chair committees. What if a far-right MEP was to chair the civil liberties committee, in charge of fundamental rights issues?

Even if they would face a majority opposition, this could prevent, or at least considerably delay, the adoption of progressive policies and laws, especially in the field of migration and equality. It would also mean that a political group including MEPs who regularly incite hatred in their discourses, therefore undermining core EU values, would be allowed to become a legitimate political voice supported by taxpayers' money.

A strong presence of these MEPs could also lure more conservative or opportunistic MEPs from other groups into further pandering to their rhetoric, in the hope of regaining some political clout.

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It is therefore urgent that mainstream politicians and parties finally act to end this dangerous escalation. To do this, they must stop abandoning the framing of national and European political conversations to the far-right and adopt concrete and structured policies to decrease inequalities.

Such policies also make economic sense: for instance, investing in Roma inclusion would increase European GDPs by more than three per cent and government budgets by more than four per cent annually. Immigrants from eastern Europe have added almost €6.2bn to Britain's economy since 2004.

The increase in far-right MEPs must have the effect of an electric shock on mainstream MEPs and European political groups and parties. Beating around the bush is no longer an option: MEPs have to drive European policies grounded in the values of solidarity, equality and wellbeing for all; political groups in the European parliament should react strongly to manifestations of racism and hate.

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In this context, establishing a strong intergroup on anti-racism in the European parliament to ensure cross-party coordination to address this phenomenon is a must.

In addition, we expect EU leaders to design a roadmap to address hatred in Europe. It is high time to connect the dots between politics, economics, growing inequalities and the increase of hatred and violence in our societies.

We cannot allow the 60 million ethnic and religious minorities living in Europe - 12 per cent of the European population - to be further excluded from society and become the victims of racist violence.

About the author

Sarah Isal is chair of the European network against racism (ENAR)

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