

UK will play critical role in EU election campaign 'battle of ideas'

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News

A new report argues that the role of the UK will be "critical" to the "battle of ideas" in the current European election campaign.



European elections 23 - 26 May 2019

Photo credit: European Parliament Audiovisual

As the date for the UK's exit from the EU has been extended, British political parties will now be fielding candidates in the 23-26 May poll, amid predictions of sweeping gains for Eurosceptic parties.

The report by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) has sounded a warning, though, about the impact the UK's unexpected participation in the EU-wide poll will have.

Its authors said, "The UK's participation would risk convincing anti-European parties that the EU is

irreformable: the argument could be that the UK wanted to leave the club and was not allowed to do so.”

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They go on, “This argument is potentially powerful in light of strong forecasts for the newly-formed Brexit Party.”

This is the party founded by UK MEP Nigel Farage, the former UKIP leader.

A survey of Conservative Party members for ConservativeHome found that 62 percent were planning to vote for the party while a separate poll by Survation found that 40 percent of Conservative councillors plan to do the same.

On Tuesday, Farage announced several new candidates for the elections. Among them are think-tank director and free-speech activist Claire Fox, former soldier James Glancy, and former Conservative minister Ann Widdecombe.

“A lot is still to play for, but one thing looks certain: the next European Parliament will be highly fragmented, with no clear majority and multiple forces, with radically different visions for Europe, battling for influence” **Simon Hix, London School of Economics**

The ECFR report says that mainstream parties must “now recast themselves as symbols of change, in an environment in which anti-European parties will portray them as defenders of the status quo in Europe.”

The report explores the likely group composition of Parliament following the keenly-awaited elections.

According to data collected across 14 Member States constituting 80 percent of all seats in the Parliament, there is a “distinct possibility” that anti-European parties could form the largest political group in the parliament, winning 35 percent of the seats compared with 34 percent for what it terms a “Left bloc” and 32 percent for a “Right bloc.”

The share of the overall vote for Eurosceptic parties is, according to ECFR forecasts, set to soar by some 30 percent at this election compared with the last poll five years ago.

On average, the ECFR survey suggests that MEPs will be marginally more right-wing and marginally “less positive” about the EU and Parliament will have a slightly more Eurosceptic slant after Brexit.

The report concludes that pro-European parties should focus their message on the issues they want Europe to deal with after the elections, and not on EU institutions.

These issues vary from country to country, but many European voters prioritise affordable housing, inclusive economic growth, social integration and cohesion.

Commenting on the report's findings, Simon Hix, of the London School of Economics, said, "With just a few weeks to go, the battle is set: will an anti-EU right block emerge as the new political force, or will younger pro-Europeans mobilise around an optimistic and progressive vision for Europe?"

"A lot is still to play for, but one thing looks certain: the next European Parliament will be highly fragmented, with no clear majority and multiple forces, with radically different visions for Europe, battling for influence."

Meanwhile, Change UK: The Independent Group has launched its campaign for the elections, introducing 70 candidates who will stand for the party in constituencies in the UK.

The candidates include former BBC journalist Gavin Esler and journalist Rachel Johnson, sister of the former Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson.

Two former Conservative MPs, Stephen Dorrell and Neil Carmichael, will also stand for the party.

Speaking on Tuesday at the campaign launch, the party's interim leader, Heidi Allen, said, "These elections are a chance to send the clearest possible message - we demand a People's Vote and the right to campaign to remain in the European Union. We are not afraid to say it as clearly as that."

About the author

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