

European Elections in the Age of Populism

- Europe Region Contributing Authors

Presidential and parliamentary elections have dominated European headlines in the first months of 2018, as voters go to the polls open across the Continent. Some election campaigns are just beginning, while others draw to a long-awaited close. Accusations of corruption and fraud imply that others were over before they even began. The Michigan Journal of International Affairs Europe region writers provide coverage of the diversity and drama sweeping through European polling booths in early 2018, from Madrid to Moscow.

Spain

- Liam Beers

Spain's recent political landscape has been shaped by the Catalan separatist movement and Madrid's response to what they call an "illegal referendum" in Catalonia. From all of this internal strife has arisen a party that seeks to compete with the current heavyweight in Spanish politics Partido Popular (PP): Citizens (Ciudadanos). The Citizens party and its leader Albert Rivera hope to give the Spanish population a different option, come the 2020 general election.

Albert Rivera was born in the Catalan capital of Barcelona, served in the Parliament of Catalonia, and was elected president of the Citizens party during its founding conference in 2006. He has been reelected party leader every cycle since. Rivera is convinced that now is the time for change in Spain's political system, which has been dominated by only two parties since the transition to democracy in the 1980s. But dethroning the PP will be no easy task: it is easily the most organized party in Spain and has been extremely popular until recent allegations of corruption in the party hit the front page of Madrid papers.

Regardless of the PP's dominance, the Citizens party and Rivera still provide something that Europe desperately needs right now: stability. Citizens has been described as both center-left and center-right; Rivera and his party are anti-separatist on the Catalonia issue, and perhaps most importantly, show Spaniards that there is a third option in elections. Rivera's views on Catalan independence may be considered typical by Spanish standards, as he continues to suggest no change in the relationship between Spain and Catalonia. This stance offers stability for a country that certainly needs to step back and take a breath over the issue. His idea that politics has to move away from the left-right axis echoes French President Emmanuel Ma-

cron. Citizens is also winning support through its policy proposals fighting business monopolies and its Scandinavian-style labor reforms that help the unemployed retrain and find jobs. Citizens wants to shake up the political, electoral, and educational systems and tackle Spain's high rate of school dropout. Given Rivera's genuine popularity, these goals could very much come to fruition. He claims the Citizens party is part of a worldwide movement, citing Macron and Canada's Justin Trudeau among other world leaders.

Rivera's ambition and calming messages could be exactly what Spain – and Europe – need to begin the process of healing from recent, tumultuous years in politics. While Rivera faces an uphill battle in the 2020 elections, there is a very good chance that Citizens will play a major role in Spanish politics for the foreseeable future.

Italy

- B.A. Bacigal

In the wake of this spring's parliamentary elections in Italy, one thing is clear: the wave of populism sweeping Europe persists unabated in Italy. Unfortunately, that seems to be the only thing that is clear, as no single party or alliance achieved the 40 percent necessary for an absolute parliamentary majority. Italy now faces what is called a hung parliament with no clear leader or ruling party – described by European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker as the "worst case scenario" for Europe.

Polling at a historic low, the governing, center-left Democratic Party received just nineteen percent of Italians' votes, while anti-establishment, right-wing coalitions gained unprecedented ground. The far-right Five Star Movement came the closest to a parliamentary majority with roughly 32.7 percent of the vote, and the anti-immigrant League party (formerly the Northern League) gained more votes than even

familiar face and former PM Silvio Berlusconi and his Forza Italia party, with 17.5 percent and fourteen percent, respectively.

With nearly a third of Italian youth unemployed, and the devastating effects of Italy's recent economic recession only just beginning to wane, backlash against the establishment was expected. Five Star capitalized on this discontent with promises of a universal basic income and greater subsidy schemes, messages that deeply resonated with constituents in the south of Italy, which traditionally has the highest unemployment rates in the country. Other notions of xenophobia, Euroscepticism, and isolationism rose to the forefront of populist campaigns, pulling out voter sentiments that had been underlying debate for nearly a decade.

After days of negotiations, center-right to far-right factions have finally reached an agreement on parliamentary speakers, with Five Star's Roberto Fico as president of the lower house, and Forza Italia's strong-voiced Elisabetta Casellati as president of the Senate. No formal governmental alliance has been announced as of yet. The results of the Italian elections have sparked fear in establishment leaders, hope for populist visionaries, and uncertainty not just for Italy, but for Europe as a whole. Now, the world waits to see whether or not a larger party coalition will form – but regardless of the final composition of the Italian parliament, populism persists.

Cyprus

- Mark Dovich

Cyprus has historically been inhabited by two main ethnic groups, Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots. Tensions between the two communities culminated in a 1974 military coup d'état by Greek Cypriot nationalists, in response to which the Turkish government invaded and occupied the northern part of the island. The

island remains divided to this day, with Greek Cypriots living in the southern half of the island (the Republic of Cyprus) and Turkish Cypriots living in the northern half (the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus). Since the Republic of Cyprus joined the EU in 2004, negotiation talks to reunify the island have been held repeatedly, though without any definitive results.

Indeed, reunification emerged as a central campaign issue in the most recent presidential elections in the Republic of Cyprus in early 2018. Nine candidates – all men – contested the two-round race, including incumbent President Nicos Anastasiades, who prioritized reunification with the north, as well as economic stability, during his first term in office. His main opponents were Nikolas Papadopoulos, a noted hardliner on reunification and himself the son of a former president, and Stavros Malas, a pro-reunification candidate supported by Akel, the communist party. In addition, Elam, a far-right and neo-fascist party, fielded a presidential candidate for the first time in Cyprus' history.

In the first round of the election, held in late January, Anastasiades received 36 percent of the vote, Malas 30 percent, and Papadopoulos 26 percent. Christos Christou, the far-right candidate, received six percent. As no single candidate received a majority of the vote, a runoff was then held between Anastasiades and Malas in early February, in which Anastasiades received 56 percent of the vote and a second term in office. Restarting reunification talks with the north was, naturally, one of Anastasiades' first promises, upon reelection. Whether or not he will be able to keep such promises, however, remains unclear.

Czech Republic

- Anna Haynes

Continuing the Eurosceptic trend in Eastern European administrations right now, incumbent Czech President Miloš Zeman claimed victory yet again, running on a platform of migration reform and protecting national sovereignty. Rhetoric throughout his first term emphasized these same topics, consistently promoting anti-immigrant sentiment and vocalizing dissatisfaction with the EU. Accused of blatant sexism and Islamophobia, Zeman considers himself the “Czech Trump” and capitalizes on media attention to fuel his agenda. Most notably, the Czech Republic has only admitted twelve asylum seekers out of the 2,600 assigned to them by the EU quota system. Based on his recent

reelection, support for such policies does not seem to be waning.

However, Zeman's belligerence toward migrants and disregard for the Czech Republic's Western European allies spurred Jiří Drahoš, the former leader of the Czech Academy of Sciences, to oppose him in the most recent election. Drahoš was a complete newcomer to the political arena. He criticized Zeman's crude language, aggressive politics, and general divisiveness, claiming in a debate that “Mr. Zeman is the past... He is now a symbol of division and name-calling”. Although Drahoš ultimately lost the election, he nonetheless posed an impressive challenge to the incumbent, claiming 48.6 percent of the votes with relatively high voter turnout.

Many of Zeman's opponents also cite his troublingly close relationship with Vladimir Putin as a reason for distrusting his policies. Some suspect Russian meddling in the election, including political scholars and Drahoš himself. In the days leading up to the vote, a series of fake stories accused Drahoš of pedophilia and communist collusion in the same way that many Russian disinformation campaigns have recently done. This interference in Czech politics has caused many to question whether the country will remain in the EU and NATO, or whether Zeman will push the country to leave these organizations in the upcoming term. As one scholar pointed out, this sort of fracturing may ultimately prove beneficial to Russia: “Europe is dividing itself, and [the Russians] do not have to do much.”

Russia

- Meghan Rowley

Russian president Vladimir Putin claimed reelection victory on March 18 in an unsurprising result in a noncompetitive election. Official numbers credit him with over 75 percent of the vote, easily securing the autocrat another six years in office. This recent victory essentially guarantees that Putin will oversee the country for a total of 25 years, making him the only other Russian leader to rule for more than two decades besides dictator Joseph Stalin.

Many liberal Russians discredit the election by considering the lackluster quality of the candidates, calling Putin's seven opponents “the circus” that offer no real change. Millionaire business Pavel Grudinin was endorsed by the Communist Party, the second-most competitive party in Russian politics after Putin's own

United Russia, but was then seen as noncompetitive after Russian media revealed his company observed numerous illegal business practices. Liberal challenger Ksenia Sobchak was largely viewed as a non-threat, partly for her reality TV past and partly because of close family ties with Putin himself. Consequently, people did not take her progressive statements calling for legalizing same-sex marriage and returning recently-annexed Crimea to Ukraine seriously, instead suspecting her as Putin's handpicked ‘opponent’. The only viable contender, opposition leader Alexei Navalny, was barred from running after questionable and politically-motivated convictions of embezzlement.

With several unviable opponents, Moscow has attempted to increase turnout to indicate the legitimacy of its ‘democracy’ to the outside world. Get-out-the-vote campaigns included selfie competition raffles for iPhones and cars. Hard-to-find food products were placed as incentives for voting at polling places. Bosses threatened termination if employees abstained from voting. And it may have worked: turnout increased from 65 percent in the 2012 elections to 70 percent in 2018. At the same time, Golos, an independent election monitoring group, has cited multiple counts of election fraud, including ballot stuffing and blocking security cameras. Nonetheless, the Russian Election Commission has declared the polls valid.

Regardless, the real controversies are not necessarily the conditions of this election, but the upcoming one. Putin is constitutionally barred from running again after his term ends in 2024. Yet, given that he has once before worked around the country's term limit rules by temporarily serving as Prime Minister (2008-2012), it is not out of the question that he may do so again. Furthermore, as other world leaders, such as China's Xi Jinping and Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, have recently removed constitutional constraints on their powers, international trends put similar Russian measures within the realm of possibility. Though Putin has called such suggestions “silly”, after nearly a quarter century in power, it does not look like he is ready to retire just yet. ■