

## Major Earthquakes?

### Tectonic shifts in the EU and Israel after the elections: Implications for Europe and the Middle East – Israeli and European Perspectives

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The annual European meeting of the Israeli-European Policy Network (IEPN) in Brussels focused on the results of the Israeli general elections conducted in April 2019 as well as the upcoming elections in September, and the European Parliament elections conducted in May 2019, and their impact on EU-Israel relations.

The elections for the European Parliament were held between May 23 and May 26, 2019. Two major issues occupied the public discourse in Europe in the months prior to the election – the Brexit plan and the possibility that the trend of the rise in power of populist parties, especially from the right wing, will continue. As for Brexit, the UK has been granted an extension of article 50, until October 31, 2019, and therefore it has participated in the EU elections.

With regards to the rise of far-right populist parties, the trend already observed in the 2014 elections has continued, albeit its pace has somehow decreased. In 2014, despite the surge of right wing populist parties, representing the third largest political force in EU politics, the historical blocs (EPP and S&D) managed to preserve the majority. Since then, right wing populist parties have continued to gain power all across Europe – France, Germany, Austria, Sweden and Italy all experienced this rise in the national elections held in each country. The Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland are all led by right wing populists. Therefore, it was expected that also in the 2019 European Parliamentary elections, far-right populist parties would strengthen their position. However, while right-wing populists gained votes, there was no massive surge as was originally expected by many observers.

What was perhaps more striking was the loss by the two key parliamentary blocs – The Center-Right European People's Party (EPP) and the Socialists and

Democrats (S&D) – of the majority. Other surprises included the electoral successes of the liberal party (which obtained 106 seats, gaining 38) and of the Greens (which obtained 74 seats, as compared to the previous 52 seats in 2014).

In the right camp, the nationalist bloc received 58 seats, an increase of 21 seats, and the populist bloc received 54 seats, an increase of 13 seats. The right wing nationalists (Europe of Nations and Freedom – ENF, replaced in 2019 by the Identity and Democracy – ID) strengthened their support mostly in Italy and France and the populist bloc (Europe of Freedom and Democracy – EFD) strengthened in the UK, where the vote mainly focused on Brexit (contrary, in Germany the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party actually received less votes compared to the 2017 elections in the country). In the left, the majority of the increase in support for the liberals came from France, Denmark and Estonia, and much of the increase in the Green bloc arrived from Germany, Finland, France and the UK.

In general, the results demonstrate a growing split among Europeans, however there has been a clear pro-EU majority. A higher than usual turnout managed to somewhat halt the increase of right wing populist parties, suggesting that pro-European voters participated in the election in higher rates. In addition, the fear of the rise of extreme right wing parties and populist parties resulted in a major shift in votes that increased the power of the liberals and the green parties in the left. While it seems the pro-Europeans have a majority in the Parliament, this does not mean that the rules of the game did not change. The traditional parties survived the elections, however they need to adapt to a rapidly changing reality in which their exclusivity in the decision making process in Europe is decreasing.

In the meantime, in Israel, general elections have been held on April 9th, 2019. In the beginning it seemed as if, once again, the right bloc, headed by Benjamin Netanyahu and the Likud party had won the

election. The Likud party managed to receive 35 seats, the same number of seats that their main opponent, the Blue and White party, headed by Benjamin Gantz, received. Nonetheless, Netanyahu has been backed up by other parties in his bloc and received a majority of support among Knesset members to be recommended as prime minister. Yet, Netanyahu did not manage to form a coalition within the legal time constraint of 42 days, and forced re-elections that are about to be held on September 17th, 2019.

While the traditional right wing bloc, together with the Ultra-Orthodox parties, received 65 seats, due to the fact that 'Israel is Our Home', Avigdor Liberman's party, did not agree to join the coalition, allegedly due to the Ultra-Orthodox parties demands, Netanyahu did not have the necessary majority of Knesset members in his coalition. Meanwhile, for the first time since 2009, a candidate from the center-left camp managed to receive the same result as Netanyahu. 'Blue and White' party, headed by Benjamin "Benny" Gantz a former IDF Chief of Staff and Yair Lapid, head of the "Yesh Atid" party and former minister of finance, has been formed and received 35 seats as well. As it seemed that there was a chance to beat Netanyahu's coalition, many left wing voters changed their traditional vote and voted to this new party. As a result the Israeli labor party managed to receive only 6 seats, the worst result the party has ever experienced.

In the upcoming elections, both the left and the right bloc are trying to improve their position in order to enhance their chances to form a coalition. In the political left the Meretz party joined forces with former prime minister Ehud Barak and former members of the labor party. In addition the Arab 'Joint List' has been reunited. In the right bloc, there is a consolidation between different parties in what seems to be an effort to form one right wing party to the right of the Likud. Nonetheless, according to polls, none of the blocs has the majority at the moment, and Liberman, who refuses to declare who he would support as prime minister, strengthens his hold dramatically, and would most likely hold the keys to form the next government and to the identity of the next Israeli prime minister.

#### Minutes and Conclusions from the Conference

The annual European meeting of the Israeli-

European Policy Network (IEPN) in Brussels, which was held on July 10th-11th, 2019, focused on the EU elections and the Israeli general elections, and their potential impact on the relations between Israel and Europe. More specifically, discussions focused on how further internal fragmentation and polarization throughout EU member states will impact intra-EU politics as well as European foreign policy in general and its relations with Israel more specifically. In addition, ideas about how to raise again the Israeli-Palestinian issue to the public agenda in Europe and the European response to the Trump administration peace plan were discussed.

From the European perspective it has been discussed that on the one hand populist right wing parties and nationalist parties, failed to increase their power as expected, and there is a prominent majority of parties that represent pro-European stands. On the other hand, the traditional camps lost their majority and the European parliament is divided into more political camps, which may lead to complication in the decision making process. The Europeans raised their concern that the Visegrad (V4) group would use this fragmentation in order to further undermine the EU's ability to formulate a coherent policy. With regards to Israel, the similarity to those countries, and the fact that Netanyahu's government uses this split in Europe to its advantage, has been noted.

From the Israeli perspective, the strengthening of the right-wing parties in the EU hinders a united European position towards the Israeli-Palestinian issue, benefitting the right wing government in Israel. With Trump in the White House, if the European political landscape shifts more dramatically to the right, and if Netanyahu secures another victory, it will be harder for Netanyahu to backtrack from his latest proposal to annex parts of the occupied West Bank. Thus, a collision course is brewing between standard European foreign policy and the possibility of an increasingly right wing coalition in Israel: a collision course which will only be further fueled by a rise in right wing support in Europe.

#### European Perspective

In Europe, the EU Parliament currently includes 751 members from 28 member states. Traditionally, the notable blocs in the European Parliament included

the center-right – the European People's Party (EPP), and the Socialists and Democrats (S&D). However, a steady increase in Euro-skepticism and populist forces from the right and the European Green Party, and Alliance of Liberal and Democrats from the left, has pushed the EPP and the S&D out of their majority hold in the European Parliament. The narrative is now split between pro-EU and anti-EU factions. Particularly, the V4 (Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, and Slovakia) are showing more hawkish position towards the EU. In Italy, while there are voices that oppose the EU, the way the Brexit plan evolved in the UK led most Italians to still support the EU.

While some focused on the negative effects of the weakening of the traditional parties, and the loss of their majority, other voiced some optimism which was expressed in two ways. First, the strengthening of the right wing populist and nationalist parties was lower than expected and some believe that the strengthening of this bloc is in a downward trend. The majority of voters are pro-Europeans. Secondly, the fact that the two traditional blocs do not hold the majority means that more people have a voice in the parliament and that those blocs would have to change and to deal with issues that many people in Europe are troubled by, such as global warming and climate change, the refugee crisis, loss of economic security, etc.

Moreover, though many say that the EU member states are trending towards right-wing extremism, some challenge this notion based on the idea that there are actually different trends in different countries. Some of these countries are more efficient in fighting back against populism than others, and instead the general trend is that parties are getting smaller. As mentioned above, having smaller parties is making the bigger parties more marginalized, leading to an increasingly difficult political situation in the EU.

As instanced by the veto for Timmermans to be elected for the European Commission presidency, the battle between anti-EU and pro-EU parties' wages on as anti-EU governments, such as those of the V4 and Italy, are dissatisfied with their current situations. One of the main reasons the EU is under such heavy criticism from right-wing parties is that it is an easy scapegoat. As instanced by right-wing politicians under the Brexit campaign, anti-EU sentiment can be used as

a conduit through which general dissatisfaction can be channeled.

With regards to Israel, there has been a consensus among European participants that Israel is a valuable and unique trading partner. The EU would never vote against Israeli security and holds Israel's security in high regard. However, there is an understanding that the EU will not mediate between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, as Netanyahu prefers to work with the United States on this issue. Though Israel is a valuable ally to the EU, the priority of Israel in the EU's foreign political will has shifted. The Yemen crisis and Syrian power struggles have become more pressing to the EU, and thus Israel has fallen on the list of priorities. The EU and Israel have also split on the Iranian issue, with the EU believing that Iran is one of many destabilizers in the region while Israel believes that Iran is the main destabilizer.

Another concern that has been raised is how Europe should deal with the fact that Israel in the Netanyahu era is trying to work with separate European countries in order to weaken the union. In addition, there were concerns that just like the V4, Israel is shifting from its core liberal and democratic values towards more ethnic-centered nationalism, and that therefore Europe should reconsider its approach towards Israel in an effort to try to maintain the shared values that have been the basis of their relationship. Europe is struggling to formulate an approach for illiberal democracies both in Europe itself and for other countries outside the EU. This includes the V4, and could possibly include Israel as well if and when the country will annex parts of the West Bank. European participants highlighted that Israelis are mistaken if they distinguish between Brussels and the member-states, because in the end, the EU-positions only come into existence as a result of deliberations among the member-states.

#### Israeli Perspective

The Israeli participants voiced their opinion that the results of recent European elections are that Euro-skepticism has been largely contained relative to forecasts. However, while European countries were focused inward, they neglected to focus their attention on external issues such as Middle Eastern politics. The expectation in Israel is that if and when



the political turmoil in Europe calms down, EU will shift its focus once again to global issues in general, and to the Middle East and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict more specifically.

As mentioned above, in terms of the Israeli elections, Netanyahu and his party (Likud) were supposed to win the election, as his bloc managed to achieve 65 seats in the Knesset. However, Avigdor Liberman pulled out of the coalition, leaving Netanyahu and his ultra-right wing coalition without the necessary seats to form a government. As Netanyahu's legal entanglement continues, many in the Israeli political arena consider him illegitimate. Therefore, Netanyahu is forced to form a government with the extremists and is subject to pressure and demands by them. As a result, in an attempt to gather the needed majority to form a coalition, Netanyahu has promised to annex territories within the West Bank (including the remote areas). If Netanyahu is re-elected, he is most likely to try form a coalition once again with the Ultra-Orthodox and the extreme right wing parties. If they manage to get the majority then the system in Israel will likely become more of an illiberal democracy. Nonetheless, according to polls, without the support of Avigdor Liberman, Netanyahu does not enjoy such a majority at the moment.

In terms of reconciling the relations with the EU, the Israeli participants agreed that working with the EU is vital both on strategic and geo-political issues as well as in terms of the economy and trade. This cooperation should include propositions and negotiations on final status solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and also unconventional thinking on Israeli politics and the erosion of shared values. The Israeli participants were skeptical that Netanyahu would ever engage the EU in this manner considering he has refused to meet with the EU collective on issues such as these in the past. Nonetheless, if Netanyahu will be forced to form a unity government with 'Blue and White', or to step down, an effort should be made to restore the strategic dialogue between Israel and the EU.

Nonetheless, some of the Israeli participants expressed their concern that the European Union's position with regards to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is overly influenced by a distorted understanding of the situation in Gaza and the West Bank, and that a

change in the European view on the conflict is needed in order to reconnect it to discussions on the subject. The international media coverage is only partial, somewhat biased against Israel, and does not fully reflect the facts on ground reality. The combination of what is perceived in Israel as a biased international media, a feeling of anti-Israel sentiment stemming from the EU, and the damage to the EU legitimacy carried out by the current Israeli government, fuels distrust among Israelis towards Europe. Thus, it has been claimed that only 18% of Israelis see the EU as being friendly towards Israel.

Another issue that has been discussed is that in June 2018, the Israeli Knesset passed a basic law - Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People (nation state bill). This legislation was criticized both by the local opposition and internationally, as many believe it constitutes a basis for discrimination against minorities. The criticism focused on the fact that it does not include a reference to define properties of Israel – democracy and equality. With regards to this law, Israeli participants expressed varied views. Some chose to focus on positive points of the law, such as the attention it raises to anti-Semitic events and the way it forces other countries to deal with increasing anti-Semitism. On the other hand, some participants disagreed on this point, believing the nation state bill would actually increase anti-Semitism. The Israeli participants emphasize that anti-Semitism is not equivalent to anti-Zionism, but sometimes the two are hard to disentangle, and sometimes the European criticism crosses the thin border between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism.

### **Business as Usual? The V4 and the Art of the (Dis)agreement**

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#### **Executive Summary**

The recent cooperation between the Visegrad Four (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia; hereafter V4) to thwart the nomination of Franz

Timmermans and other high ranked EU officials (henceforth known as the "top jobs saga") provides an ideal avenue to analyze and understand the way in which the V4 cooperates towards the goal of maximizing their influence. The ad hoc entente with Italy on the necessity to prevent Frans Timmermans from being nominated President of the Commission, which only had a limited political framing given that only Hungary represents the EPP (from which it is, on paper only, suspended), is the perfect example of how the V4 can work together to achieve certain goals and decisively influence the EU political processes.

This coordinated action of the V4 on this agenda comes in square contrast with the relatively low levels of activity and unity the grouping has on other cases currently under discussion at the EU, further highlighting the fact that the V4 has become a tool used on an ad hoc basis for the four countries to maximize their influence when they see eye-to-eye on a specific issue. However, it should be noted that V4 unity often takes the shape of a veto, blocking external proposals rather than creating them, with a few exceptions. In the case of EU leadership, the V4 was happy with simply ensuring that Timmermans would not get the nomination rather than pushing for their designated candidate, Maros Sefcovic of Slovakia, to get a top post. While all four governments have hailed the results as a success, the rhetorical bluster will likely soon recede given the fact that no regional politician will occupy a high post besides another Vice-Presidency position. This is likely to mire the region in the uncomfortable position of feeling like it has less influence over the agenda setting of the EU and may perpetuate the distance that national politicians often express towards "Brussels". In return, it is expected that the V4's behavior towards the EU's presidency and other high positions will further contribute to the negative perception the V4 developed towards Brussels and some European chancelleries at the height of the migration crisis in 2015. Does this mean that the V4, and its individual member states, will be more isolated in the next five years?

The likely answer is no. However, while, in the next few years, its interests will be aligned on certain key EU issues, the political unity between leaders, and especially the growing divide between Poland

and Hungary on one side and the Czech Republic and Slovakia on the other, will limit the extent to which these positions of unity may provide a decisive weight in the European negotiations. For the latter two countries, the relationship with Germany, France, Austria, and, to a lesser extent, the Benelux and Nordic countries is just as important as with the V4, which continues to pay the price of its negative external perception and constitutes a real public relations issue for Prague and Bratislava. Therefore it may not be necessary to overanalyze the unity of the V4 on the top jobs issue, especially given the fact that they seem to have obtained nothing more than a pyrrhic victory with the dismissal of Timmermans.

Considering the destructive power the V4 has, is there a strategy that should be adopted in order to limit the influence of the V4? The loose unity of the grouping means that a divide and conquer strategy, by focusing solely on Prague and Bratislava for example, is not necessarily bound to be successful. On the other hand, V4 capitals are much more keen to be engaged on the onset of consensus formulation in the Council rather than being at the mercy of any French-German (or other) agreement, which is why the refusals of the V4 to sign on are much more publicized than the cases in which they follow the majority. The V4 will not be broken in the next five years, but it could become much stronger if a country like the Czech Republic sees itself isolated in the Council and decides to devote renewed energy to consensus building at the regional level. The region will continue to search for elusive "respect" (such as the one it claimed it did not get when its positions regarding migration supposedly became European mainstream in 2016) and will look for more constant engagement with Paris and Berlin. This will encourage more proactivity on future policies rather than reducing itself to a role of policy taker or policy killer.

For the full-text article: <https://bit.ly/2ZgYEva>



## EU-Israel A Tale of Three Elections - An opportunity for reflection

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### Executive Summary

In the last week of May, European politicians and commentators were trying to convey the message European voters sent to their capitals and to the institutions in Brussels in the elections to the European Parliament, as Israeli politicians were caught up in a political battle between PM Benjamin Netanyahu and his longtime ally and rival, former Defense and Foreign minister Avigdor (Ivet) Liberman, who held the key to Netanyahu's extreme-right and religious orthodox coalition. For a few days, they played "chicken" over traditional and social media, culminating in an unprecedented session of the newly elected Knesset in which it dissolved itself and called for a new election only one month after the swearing in of its elected members. For the first time in the history of Israel an election rerun, or as the media likes to call it "supplementary elections", was called. There are many interpretations as to what was the motivation that led each of the main political players to choose this particular path. Only time will tell which is right.

Netanyahu's dissolution of the Knesset and the rerun for office was a blow to president Trump's plan to expose and ignite the alleged "deal of the century" aimed to end the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, in which this writer does not put much faith.

President Trump, eager to fulfil his election campaign pledge to make this "deal of the century", expressed his frustration as he was leaving the White House on an official visit to the United Kingdom. "Bibi got elected, now all of a sudden they're going to have to go through the process again. That's ridiculous", he criticized the Israeli political shakeup.

Nonetheless, it is safe to say that in Israeli eyes Brussels is the only international partner that seriously sticks the two states solution formula. Russia, China and even Arab leaders referring to it are perceived to only be paying lip service. In order to defuse this "threat" from Europe, Israel's right aligned with

extreme right wing politicians in the EU. They coalesced under islamophobic rhetoric, whereby the tradeoff consists of Israel's ignoring anti-Semitic tendencies or behavior by Eastern European in exchange for support of Israel's occupation of Palestinian land.

Europe has leverage over Israel, if it wants to, but up until now it seemed reluctant to use it. Officially, Israel still shares the universal values of the union and receives all the benefits. But having the full support of the Trump administration, the Israeli government has diverted to unilateral moves on the ground that worsen the conditions of the Palestinians. As the candidate Netanyahu is getting more and more desperate, he may complicate the situation even more. It is thus time for the European Union to rethink its approach towards Israel after the formation of the new government.

For the full-text article: <https://bit.ly/2GBV28J>



## European Parliament and Israeli Elections – What Impact and Effect on EU – Israeli Relations?

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### Executive Summary

Israel has had the de facto most advanced relations with the European Union (EU) among the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) countries. From an economic point of view, Israel – EU relations are flourishing in the last decade. Export and import levels are rising, and so is the success of Israel as part of Horizon 2020. But for over a decade the official political aspect of these relations at their most senior level are stuck, or to put it more mildly, they are in the

doldrums (a state or period of inactivity, stagnation, or even for lack of advancement, in a state of slump).

The political sphere also bears some influence on the economic relations, which are not progressing. Unlike other ENP countries, no official negotiations on a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) or Partnership Priorities (PP) are conducted. The longer the political and legal aspects of the relations are stuck, the harder it is to find the way to get the two sides out of the dead-lock to a new start. A change is needed. Can the EP elections, followed by new nominations of top EU jobs and a second round of elections expected in Israel, create a new political momentum between the EU and Israel? Or would the relations remain politically stuck and mutually frustrating? Judging by the current state of affairs, it is doubtful a change will arise. Israeli diplomats are also sceptic. Still it is worthwhile to examine which challenges and opportunities these elections and nominations pose for EU – Israeli relations.

Despite Israel and the EU being the most like-minded among ENP countries, they are politically drifting apart. The political doldrum has negative impact on the economic aspects of the relations. Israel should not give up on the EU, and the EU should not give up on Israel. The EU's double-standard linkage policy towards Israel has brought no gains other than reinforcing the distrust Israelis feel towards the EU. Only dialogue would bring the sides closer. Israel is a strategic partner of the EU, bringing real added value in research and innovation, cybersecurity and combating terrorism, among other fields. The EU's double standard towards Israel should be stopped. The EU (meaning some of its member states) should stop suspending the Association Council, which should reconvene regularly, as held with so many countries, among others Tunisia, Jordan, Egypt and Morocco. The reconvening of the Association Council would be more than a symbolic gesture. It would force the Israeli government to consider the relations at a political level, and not only at civil-servants level. PP agreement should be negotiated and signed, as the EU does with the above, Algeria and Lebanon. Negotiations over DCFTA should be opened with Israel, as done with Morocco and Tunisia. New fields of cooperation can be envisaged, such as the new

field of security the EU started to develop, (e.g., PESCO - Permanent Structured Cooperation). This is an area in which Israel has expertise and advantages of innovation, which can give an added value to the EU.

Only in a few months we will be able to estimate if there is a chance to re-ignite Israel – EU relations. EP elections and the following nominations to EU key positions do not look promising in that respect, especially that of Josep Borrell to be the High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy. If the elections in Israel would result in a shift towards a centrist government, and if this new government will indicate its will to re-ignite the MEPP, a change for the better may be possible. If the right conditions prevail, the supporters of EU – Israeli relations would be very much needed to raise their voices to encourage such change in the public opinion in the EU member states and in Israel.

It would be good to base EU – Israeli relations on the words Josep Borrell said before the Knesset when he visited Israel in 2005 as EP President: "We need to meet more, we need to hold mutual visits... there could be difference of opinion, but we should solve them... Europe and Israel need one another. One cannot imagine neither Europe nor Israel without the strong bonds between them... the only way to overcome the existing difficulties between Israel and Europe is to move forward to a common future." Where there's a will, there's a way.

For the full-text article: <https://bit.ly/30WQwtk>







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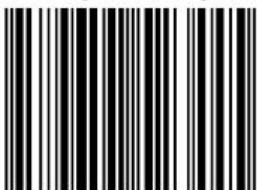
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