

The European elections and European development policy

Could the first political group with a vision please stand up?

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Bonn, 13 May 2024. EU citizens have a strong interest in the upcoming European Parliament (EP) election. A recent Eurobarometer survey indicates that they are well aware of its significance in the current geopolitical context. In times of polarised debate, disinformation and identity politics, polls predict that populist radical right and Eurosceptic parties will substantially gain, whereas particularly the Greens, Liberals and Left will lose seats. Voting projections should always be analysed with care. Nevertheless, such an election result would mean a significant shift from the EP's progressive and pro-European focus to a Parliament that is more Eurosceptic and national- interest driven.

To understand what a shift in the balance of power in the Parliament would mean for international cooperation, we had a look at the party group manifestos, which give important indications of what the groups collectively aim for after the elections. Overall, the majority of the manifestos show a selective coverage of EU external relations with a focus on defence and security, migration and the EU's economic and trade interests, while development policy plays a marginal role. This is not too surprising, since development policy traditionally does not have a prominent position in election manifestos, also during national elections.

Where development policy does feature in the manifestos, political group's positioning overall reflects the classical left right divide. The *Socialist & Democrats*, for instance, consider the 'objective of development policies to be to improve people's lives in the EU's partner countries'. The Greens focus on international climate diplomacy and call for a shift from development aid to a global just transition and a 'detailed approach to scrutinize and align the EU international cooperation budget with Agenda 2030'. The Left includes a call for de-colonising the EU's external policies, a focus on debt relief and use of Special Drawing Rights under the International Monetary Fund to invest into the socio-ecological transformation in partner countries. The European People's Party makes its sole reference to development when arguing that 'new trade agreements, development aid and visa policies' should 'depend on the cooperation of third countries in the field of migration, more specifically on returns and readmission of their nationals'.

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Indeed, most of the groups have strong positions on migration. The strong focus on migration policy reflects the so-called 'contagion mechanism', which assumes that mainstream parties take up issues and sometimes positions of populist radical right parties in the hope of winning back voters. Two questions are particularly prominent: whether the EU should continue to cooperate with autocratic regimes in its direct neighbourhood under so called 'Migration pacts' (e.g. with Egypt and Tunisia); and whether to attach conditionality to aid in relation to the return and readmission

of migrants and refugees. The Greens and the Left reject the tying of aid to migration deals and the readmission of migrants and refugees.

Strikingly, Global Gateway and Team Europe are ignored by all group manifestos. This is significant because both are not just short-lived initiatives of the current Commission, but touch upon the very fundamentals of EU development policy: How can Europeans work better together to be more visible and effective? And how should the EU position itself in a geopolitically heated global environment? The current Commission has a clear – and by now well known – perspective on these questions, as a recent document leaked to Politico reveals. The document was likely written to inform the next Development Commissioner, who will face the new EP in a confirmation hearing this autumn.

To this end, the document lays out a vision for the future of the EU's international partnerships. In what is described in the document as a highly competitive global environment, the EU should in a three-pronged approach combine trade, investments and macro-economic support to primarily focus on the EU's own economic interests in engaging with 'emerging markets and developing economies', in order to 'diversify supply chains, ensure access to energy and raw materials.' In the public debate that followed, NGOs strongly opposed such an approach and reminded the EU of its legal obligations to make poverty eradication in partner countries the primary objective of its development policy.

Democratic and Europe-committed political groups should position themselves much more strongly on the future of the EU's development policy. They should work together on a more comprehensive and sustainability-oriented narrative that aims to reconcile the EU's own interests with those of partner countries to jointly promote global sustainable development. In essence, this also implies to avoid an EU stance that is perceived as neo-colonial as opposed to 'assertive'. Otherwise, they are playing into the hands of populist, right-wing parties, which are likely to attempt to limit development policy to curbing migration and promoting European economic interests.