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The European Union: Has the Countdown Begun?

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On May 25, 2014, 388 million European Union citizens voted for more than 751 members of the European Parliament, who will serve for the next five years. On the agenda was the future of the “European project,” an unprecedented attempt to create a meta-national institution endowed with powers willingly relinquished by the member states and transferred to the said entity.

Since the establishment of the institutions and organizations that gave rise to the European Union out of the ruins of the Second World War, there has been ongoing tension between the EU central institutions and its key members, especially Great Britain. While the founding states (Germany, France, Italy, and the three Benelux countries) believed from the outset in their ability to create a supranational system, other countries that joined later, and in particular Great Britain, objected to several basic principles and therefore received “concessions,” including the freedom to not adopt the common currency, the euro, and the freedom to not join the Schengen Agreement (named for a small town in Luxembourg where the borders of France, Germany, and Luxembourg meet), which provides for completely free movement, without border control, between these countries. In Great Britain, the resistance was even greater, and 1993 saw the establishment of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), which objects to British membership in the EU. British Prime Minister David Cameron has promised that if he is reelected next year, he will hold a referendum in 2017 on Britain’s continued membership in the Union.

The financial crisis in the industrialized world has not bypassed Europe in general and specific members in particular, for example, Greece. It has increased doubts as to the EU’s ability, first, to prevent this kind of crisis, and second, to provide appropriate solutions. In fact, only the determination of German Chancellor Angela Merkel and European Central Bank President Mario Draghi enabled the EU to come to the aid of the suffering countries and give the organization and its financial institutions prospects of recovery.

This week’s elections were thus a vote of confidence in the EU and a test of support by European citizens for the continued existence of the Union, and especially, the continued strengthening of its central institutions. This gave the election results an importance that exceeds the size of the various parties that constitute the European Parliament. Many voices

called for increasing independence for the member states at the expense of the EU central institutions, specifically, the European Council (composed of heads of state), the European Parliament, and the European Commission. An example is the interview by former French President Nicolas Sarkozy to two major European newspapers, in which he recommended establishing a central French-German bloc in Europe; this would of course weaken the role of the major EU institutions. Sarkozy added that in his opinion, the Schengen Agreement should be abolished.

Was it Sarkozy who gave the final push for the astonishing victory of Marine Le Pen and the National Front in France? Perhaps, but the trend was clear even before Sarkozy's interview. When the results were announced after two-thirds of the vote had been counted, Le Pen herself declared that the people "no longer want to be led by those outside our borders, by EU commissioners and technocrats who are not elected." The Euroskeptics, as they are called, doubled their strength in the new Parliament, most notably in Denmark and the Netherlands, where anti-immigration parties were elected, and in Hungary, where Jobbik, a party with clear anti-Semitic overtones, made significant gains. In Great Britain, the UKIP apparently came in first. Its leader, Nigel Farage, has stated that his party wants not only Great Britain, but all of Europe to withdraw from the EU.

While the European People's Party, which held the largest number of seats (265) in the outgoing Parliament, has retained this primacy, it lost more than 40 seats. In Germany, its stronghold, a party called Alternative for Germany, established only a year ago, won 6.5 percent of the votes.

Yet despite the loss of seats by the European People's Party, its electoral victory is very important because it reflects the desire of the centrists to continue the unification process. On the other hand, there are increasing calls in Europe, and not only from Marine Le Pen, for full transparency in the EU executive body, i.e., the European Commission, and for its subordination to the European Parliament. The head of the European People's Party, Jean-Claude Juncker of Luxembourg, will likely be appointed head of the Commission. Juncker is greatly respected throughout Europe, and in addition to serving as former prime minister of Luxembourg, has played an active role in saving Europe from the economic crisis in recent years. He will have the heavy responsibility of restoring the European voter's trust in the EU's central apparatus, those more than 30,000 anonymous officials in Brussels who have the power to decide on laws and regulations that are an integral part of daily life for all European citizens. Juncker will have to cooperate more closely with the European Parliament, whose power has grown in the past five years and will grow even more, as the Euroskeptics are eager to prove that they were elected in order to reduce the power of the European Commission.

The European dream suffered a hard blow in the 2014 elections, but the ambitious idea has not come to an end. In the face of the rising economic power of the United States and China,

the countries of Europe, other than perhaps Germany, will have a difficult time coping alone. At the same time, the main parties in the EU will not have an easy time resisting the extremist xenophobic parties built on nationalism and ideological opposition to the idea of union.

And Israel? The rise of nationalist parties with racist and anti-Semitic backgrounds should worry Israel and the Jewish community in Europe. The growing number of anti-Semitic incidents in Europe, including physical violence, has already set off alarm bells among heads of state. The murder in Brussels several hours before the polls opened in Europe, in which two Israelis were among the four fatalities, is symbolic. Israel must demand concerted action throughout the continent, led by education and law enforcement efforts, in order to confront the growing anti-Semitism.

Some in Israel will perhaps find some consolation in the trend toward the weakening of the EU's central institution in Brussels because of Europe's scathing criticism of Israeli policy on relations with the Palestinians, and especially on the settlements. Yet any consolation is limited: In the coming years, Europe will remain not only Israel's largest trading partner, but also a political bloc that, despite all the differences of opinion and the clear trend that emerged in the European Parliament elections, will continue to express its collective opinion on the subject of the Middle East. While the preference of Israeli leaders for transferring the political dialogue with Europe from Brussels to the leaders of individual states will grow stronger, it would be a mistake to think that these elections have eliminated the central apparatus. Political leaders in the key countries of the EU, and especially in Germany, will likely wish to strengthen the central establishment in order to prevent the destructive consequences of isolationism and a return to the period when the idea of the nation-state reigned supreme. In the twentieth century, this led to destruction, devastation, and of course the Holocaust, which annihilated one third of the Jewish people.

