

International

European voters set stage for battle for EU's soul

Eurosceptic parties hope to capture third of the seats

BRUSSELS: Europeans headed to the polls in their tens of millions yesterday as 21 countries chose their champions in a battle between the nationalist right and pro-EU forces to chart a course for the union. Turnout by midday was higher than it had been in 2014 in some countries, notably France and Romania, and roughly stable in others, as reports began to trickle in from around the continent. Seven EU member states had already voted, but no official results can be published until the rest have taken part.

Eurosceptic parties opposed to the project of ever closer union hope to capture as many as a third of the seats in the 751-member Strasbourg assembly, disrupting the pro-integration consensus. The far-right parties of Italian deputy PM Matteo Salvini and France's Marine Le Pen will lead this charge, and anti-EU ranks will be swelled by the Brexit Party of British populist Nigel Farage. France's President Emmanuel Macron has taken it upon himself to act as figurehead for the centrist and liberal parties hoping to shut the nationalists out of key EU jobs and decision-making.

"Once again Macron is daring us to challenge him. Well let's take him at his word: On May 26, we'll challenge him in the voting booth," Le Pen told a rally on Friday. It was not clear at midday which side was carrying the day, but the battle seems to have motivated French voters, with 19.26 percent turning out, 3.5 points up from the same point in 2014.

'Extremists are mobilizing'

Meanwhile, the mainstream parties are vying between themselves for influence over the choice of a new generation of top EU officials, including the powerful president of the European Commission. And turnout will be closely scrutinized in case another drop in participation undermines the credibility of the EU parliament as it seeks to establish its authority. Britain and the Netherlands were first to vote, on Thursday, followed by Ireland and the Czech Republic on Friday with Slovakia, Malta and Latvia on Saturday, leaving the bulk of the 400 million eligible voters to join in yesterday.

At the last EU election in 2014, Slovakia had the lowest turnout of any country, at less than 14 percent, and centrist president Andrej Kiska is worried that "extremists are mobilizing". Poland's right-wing government, led by Law and Justice (PiS), has been accused of breaking European law by undermining the independence of the judiciary, but Polish voters still say they support EU membership. "I would like there to be no nationalists in the parliament, or at least that they do not have a majority," retiree Ryszard Dabrowski told AFP at a Warsaw polling station.

But the right and the far-right have not had everything their own way so far. In the Netherlands, the center-left party of EU vice

president Frans Timmermans won the most votes and added two seats for the Socialists and Democrats (S&D) in parliament, according to exit polls. The S&D's center-right rival the European People's Party (EPP) was buoyed by exit polls suggesting that Prime Minister Leo Varadkar's pro-EU Fine Gael party was in the lead in Ireland.

Jobs fair

Even if Britain leaves the European Union on Oct 31, the latest deadline for Brexit, then its MEPs could still play a role in this summer's scramble to hand out top jobs. Thursday's votes from Britain won't be counted until after polls close in Italy, but Farage's Brexit Party appears on course to send a large delegation to a parliament it wants to abolish. Macron is pinning his hopes on his Renaissance movement joining with the liberal ALDE voting bloc and other centrist groups to give impetus to his plans for deeper EU integration.

But much will depend on who gets the top jobs: The presidencies of the Council and the Commission, the speaker of parliament, the high representative for foreign policy and director of the European Central Bank. EU leaders have been invited to a summit dinner on Tuesday to decide how to choose the nominees, and Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel is expected to back the lead EPP candidate Manfred



LE TOUQUET, France: French president Emmanuel Macron looks at his wife Brigitte casting her ballot at a polling station yesterday for the European parliamentary election. — AFP

Weber for the Commission. Macron and some others oppose both Weber, a German conservative MEP with no executive experience, and the idea that the parliament should get to choose one of its own for Brussels' prime post.

Whichever way the leaders lean, there will be no immediate decision. Instead, Council president Donald Tusk will take note of how the debate went and draft the nominations before a June 21 EU summit. — AFP

Eurosceptics won't have it all their own way in polls

MADRID: Ireland, Spain, Portugal, the Baltic states... The expected surge in support for eurosceptics in elections to the European Parliament will likely spare several countries which have reaped huge benefits from EU membership. "These countries were transformed by their membership of the EU," says Jean-Dominique Giuliani, president of the Robert Schuman Foundation think tank, which would explain the lack of major eurosceptic forces.

Dublin for instance "became the gateway for investments of the Gafa (tech giants Google, Amazon, Facebook and Apple) in Europe," he adds. Spain, Portugal and the Baltic states also benefited from ample EU funds. According to the latest Eurobarometer survey published by the European Parliament, 83 percent of respondents in Ireland have a positive opinion of EU membership. That's well above the average of 61 percent for the 27 member states, excluding the United Kingdom which is in the process of leaving the bloc.

Still, this average is the highest since the early 1990s. Voters in the Netherlands appear to have shown their attachment to the bloc with pro-EU parties heading for a surprise win in the multi-day elections that end on Sunday, according to an exit poll released Thursday.

Prosperity, freedom

Where Ireland is concerned, the country has received €42 billion (\$47 billion) in EU development aid since it joined the bloc in 1973, according to Irish government figures. In all, 700,000 jobs have been created and foreign trade increased 90 fold. The main parties are pro-European. Prime Minister Leo Varadkar has called his ruling Fine Gael party "the party of Europe". Ireland, which will bear the economic brunt of Britain's looming exit from the EU, has consistently been backed by its EU partners. An exit poll in Ireland suggested Varadkar's Fine Gael was in the lead.

In Spain, which elects the fifth-biggest contingent of lawmakers to the 751-seat European Parliament, citizens are broadly pro-EU, says Jose Ignacio Torreblanca of the European Council on Foreign Relations think-tank. And that is because the EU rhymes with freedom. Spain's return to democracy following the death of longtime dictator Francisco Franco in 1975 and its entry in 1986 into the then European Economic Community "are two sides of the same coin," he adds.

EU membership helped thrust Spain into the modern world. EU development funds for example helped the country build Europe's largest high-speed rail network. Even the program of far-right party Vox, which won seats in the Spanish parliament for the first time in a general election last month, starts off by saying "We believe in Europe because we are Europe". Like Spain, in Portugal 69 percent of the population looks upon EU membership favorably, according to the Eurobarometer, despite drastic austerity imposed by Brussels after the financial crisis.

The country joined the bloc in the same year as its neighbor after decades of dictatorship. It has "benefited greatly from the European project" in terms of improved social services, education and transport, says the head of the ruling Socialist Party's poll list, Pedro Marques. The poverty rate for senior citizens in Portugal has been halved since statistics started being kept in 1995, he notes. As in Spain, polls show Portugal's ruling Socialists will win the most seats while support for the populist right will be negligible.

But what of other member states like Hungary and Poland that also benefited economically from the EU but elected eurosceptics to power? According to Giuliani, it's all down to history. "For Spain, Europe is democracy and prosperity. In Hungary or in Poland, Europe is prosperity, security but it's something that runs up against the desire to recover national sovereignty," 20 years after the end of communism, he says.

It's an entirely different story for the Baltic states. The EU and NATO allowed Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, once ruled from Moscow, to reassert their sovereignty. They became member states in 2004 and for them, the EU means access to the single market and security in the face of their giant, increasingly assertive Russian neighbor. — AFP

Could EU vote spell the end of Italy populist rule?

ROME: Italy's far-right League and anti-establishment Five Star Movement (M5S) have bickered incessantly since the coalition came to power nearly a year ago, and their performances at the European elections yesterday could lead to the end of their partnership, analysts say. Matteo Salvini, hardline interior minister and head of the anti-immigrant League, has seen his party's popularity shoot up on an "Italians first" campaign which has left the M5S and its leader Luigi Di Maio flagging in the polls.

With a fracturing coalition the League could move to dump its partner and call snap national elections if a swell in European parliamentary votes puts enough wind in its sails. "Should the results (Sunday) confirm the current level of support for right-wing parties, Salvini will probably be tempted to pull the plug sooner rather than later," Agnese Ortolani of the Economist Intelligence Unit told AFP. But she added: "The most likely scenario is some form of government crisis late this year or early in 2020."

The March 2018 general election in the eurozone's third largest economy saw the League take home just 17 percent of the vote, while the M5S - which set itself up as the honest, environmentally-friendly alternative to a corrupt



MILAN: Italian Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister Matteo Salvini casts his ballot at a polling station for the European parliamentary elections yesterday. — AFP

old political guard - pocketed over 32 percent. But in the EU elections the last opinion polls before a pre-vote media blackout showed the League boasting over 32 percent, while the share of the politically inexperienced M5S had plummeted to around 20 percent.

'Monday morning crisis?'

"For most Italians, the EU vote is being seen as part two of last year's general election," polling expert Antonio Noto said. The M5S has upped its attacks on the League in recent weeks, taking advantage of a series of embarrassing cor-

ruption scandals involving the far-right party, and has seen small gains over the past few days, according to Italian media. M5S head Di Maio raised the question this week: "Is the League asking for votes for the European elections, or to provoke a government crisis on Monday morning?"

Salvini was quick to retort: "I'm asking for votes to change Europe, not settle scores in Italy." Giuseppe Conte - the purportedly independent prime minister agreed upon by deputy prime ministers Salvini and Di Maio - has also attempted to downplay the risk. Conte said the fighting was just pre-election tub thumping and accused the national media of "seeing a crisis behind every argument". All three leaders have repeatedly insisted the government will finish out its five-year term.

But the fact remains that a strong League result - over 30 percent - could see Salvini tempted to ditch the M5S for the far-right Brothers of Italy, or a fresh alliance with the party's historic partner, billionaire Silvio Berlusconi's centre-right Forza Italia. "Now that the government has implemented its flagship spending measures (mainly, universal income and steps to facilitate early retirement), the League will be freer to consider engineering a return to the polls... and try to return to power at the head of a more cohesive coalition of right-wing parties," Eurasia Group analyst Federico Santi said. Salvini however may be reluctant to end the coalition for one reason: He is currently ruling the political roost. "From the League's standpoint, the ageing former statesman (Berlusconi) could turn out to be a liability, and it is not clear how this arrangement would be preferable to the existing one, which has worked well for the League - at least until now," Santi said. — AFP

Race to lead Britain out of EU pits old foes

LONDON: The race to become Britain's next premier heated up yesterday as Environment Secretary Michael Gove joined a crowded field of hopefuls with competing visions of how to finally pull their divided country out of the EU. Gove's bid for the leadership in the aftermath of the 2016 Brexit referendum scuppered the chances of his one-time ally Boris Johnson, who is also running this time around and is seen as the current favorite. Theresa May's resignation announcement on Friday drastically raised the chances of Britain crashing out of the European Union without a deal on Oct 31 - the current deadline set by EU leaders.

Some of the eight contenders to replace May have said they will seek to negotiate changes to a draft divorce deal struck with the EU last year but would be prepared to proceed with a



LONDON: A combination of recent pictures shows the eight contenders declared as of yesterday to replace Britain's Prime Minister Theresa May when she resigns on June 7: (From left) Rory Stewart, Esther McVey, Jeremy Hunt, Boris Johnson, Michael Gove, Dominic Raab, Andrea Leadsom and Matt Hancock. — AFP

no-deal Brexit if refused. The EU has said it is not prepared to renegotiate the terms of the deal. A no-deal Brexit would face fierce opposition in parliament, including from MPs in the ruling Conservative Party who backed staying in the EU.

Finance minister Philip Hammond yesterday warned he might even be prepared to take the drastic step of voting to bring down a future Conservative government in order to avoid no-deal. He told the BBC's Andrew Marr Show that leaving the EU without a deal would have "very significant economic and fiscal impact on the country". "It

would challenge not just me but many of my colleagues," Hammond said. May is bowing out with her legacy in tatters and the country in agony over what to do about the voters' decision to abandon the European project after more than four decades. Former foreign minister Johnson said on Friday in Switzerland: "We will leave the EU on October 31, deal or no deal". Former Brexit secretary Dominic Raab, an even more committed eurosceptic, has echoed that position. "We'd be willing to walk away from the negotiations," he told Andrew Marr. Esther McVey, another contender, set out a similar position. — AFP

Strong quake hits north Peru

LIMA: A strong 8.0-earthquake struck northern Peru in the early hours yesterday, sending residents fleeing their homes and cutting off power to at least one town, with the impact felt as far afield as neighboring Ecuador. There were no immediate reports of injuries following the quake which the US Geological Survey said struck at a depth of 110 km. The quake hit 0741 GMT about 75 km southeast of the town of Lagunas, along the Amazon basin near the border with Brazil. "Some casualties and damage are possible and the impact should be relatively localized," USGS said in a preliminary assessment.

Quakes of similar depth "typically cause less damage on the ground surface (but)... may be felt at great distance from their epicenters," it later added. The tremors were felt in northern and central Peru, including the capital Lima, where terrified residents ran out of their homes. The mayor of Lagunas, Arri Pezo, said many residents were too scared to venture back indoors for fear of aftershocks. "You could not walk at the time of the earthquake, things were falling," Pezo told the RPP radio network, adding that it was difficult to

determine any damage because the electricity supply had been knocked out.

Peruvian President Martin Vizcarra urged citizens "to remain calm" in a message on his official Twitter account. "We're evaluating the affected areas," he said. The Ministry of the Interior said on its official Twitter page that no injuries or deaths had been reported, but some houses had collapsed. Hugo Araujo, the mayor of the city of Yurimaguas near the epicenter, said, "there are many old houses that have collapsed after this strong earthquake."

Seismologists at the Geophysics Institute of Peru said the quake, which lasted just over two minutes, measured 7.5 magnitude, revising their earlier assessment of 7.2 magnitude. Experts at the US-based Pacific Tsunami Warning Center said there was "no tsunami threat because the earthquake is located too deep inside the earth." The shockwave of yesterday's tremor also extended to neighboring Ecuador, where power cuts were reported in parts of the Amazon region. "We have carried out the respective monitoring in each city to collect information and report damage after the earthquake, so far we have no news," wrote Ecuadorian Vice President Otto Sonnenholzner on his Twitter account. The president of Ecuador, Lenin Moreno, who was in Lima to attend a regional summit later yesterday, tweeted that the town of Yantzaza had experienced power cuts, adding that officials would provide more information about the quake's impact as it became available. — AFP

Rivals focus on inequality in tight Lithuania runoff

VILNIUS: Lithuanians began voting yesterday in a tight presidential runoff between two centre-right rivals in a race marked by low populist sentiment and concerns over inequality in the Baltic eurozone state. Conservative-backed independent Ingrida Simonyte - an ex-finance minister who oversaw biting austerity cuts during the financial crisis - narrowly won round one on May 12 against fellow economist Gitanas Nauseda, also running as an independent in his first bid for public office.

Simonyte, scored 31.13 percent ahead of 30.95 percent for Nauseda, who has since won backing from the governing Farmers and Greens Union after its candidate, Prime Minister Saulius Skvernelis, came third in round one with 19.72 percent support. No opinion polls were issued before Sunday's vote coinciding with European parliament elections, but analysts expect Nauseda to prevail due to his independence, broad political appeal and personality.

"I like both candidates but I'm voting for Nauseda," Vilma Abromaviciene, a 63-year-old Vilnius financial sector employee told AFP. "He's independent from political parties, and will not be pressured or controlled by them. His goal is to unite everyone." Experts noted that by choosing two pro-EU, centre-right candidates, Lithuanians who see the European Union as a source of prosperity and security have bucked growing eurosceptic and populist sentiment in the bloc.

The victor will replace popular incumbent President Dalia Grybauskaitė, a 63-year-old independent who cannot run for a third consecutive term. Dubbed the "Iron Lady" for her hard line on Russia, Grybauskaitė is tipped as a possible next European Council president.

Although Lithuanian presidents do not directly craft economic policy, bread and butter issues have dominated the race. Lithuania is struggling with a sharp population decline owing to mass emigration to Western Europe by people seeking better opportunities. The rivals have pledged to bridge the rich-poor divide in the nation of 2.8 million where, despite solid economic growth, almost 30 percent are at risk of poverty or social exclusion, notably in rural areas. Growth is forecast at 2.7 percent this year, above an average of 1.1 percent in the 19-member eurozone, but income inequality is still among the highest in the EU.

Both candidates are trusted economists with similar ideas about fighting poverty by distributing the fruits of growth more equally, although Simonyte has shied away from Nauseda's promises of "creating a welfare state". Insisting that he is "truly independent", the 55-year-old former bank advisor has vowed to forge a "Lithuania that cares about everybody, not just the privileged". Decades of TV appearances as an economic expert have made the married father of two a household name reputed for intelligence, calm and moderation. — AFP