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EP 2014-19: Key Votes

Recognizing Guaidó

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The ‚Key Votes‘ series dissects some of the most salient European Parliament (EP) votes in 2014-19. It analyses relevant political and geographic cleavages and fleshes out French and German specificities.

This issue reviews the EP vote of 31 January 2019 recognising Juan Guaidó, the President of the Venezuelan National Assembly, as interim President of the country. The vote shows that there was a solid pan-European majority at a time when the Council was divided. It also illustrates ideological cleavages regarding interference in the internal affairs of a third state, pacifism and Americanism. The interpretation thereof divided Europe’s centre-left and the political extremes. The French and German votes were in line with these patterns with pronounced divisions among the German Greens and the French Socialists.

1 The road towards Guaidó's recognition

The formal powers of the European Parliament (EP) in the area of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) are limited, but it frequently seeks to wield normative influence through non-binding resolutions. One of the most salient foreign policy topics that the EP addressed in this legislature was the deteriorating political, economic and humanitarian situation in Venezuela. Between 2014 and 2019, the EP adopted nine resolutions on this topic.

Venezuela has gradually slipped into a severe democratic, social and economic crisis. The presidential election of 20 May 2018, confirming Nicolas Maduro in office, was widely criticised as illegitimate. Peaceful protests of the democratic opposition have been met with violent repression and persecution. In early 2019, the inflation rate [exceeded](#) two million per cent and [over 3 million](#) people (roughly 10% of the population) had left the country.

The political crisis reached another level in January 2019. Days after Maduro was sworn in for his second term, Juan Guaidó, the president of the Venezuelan National Assembly, declared himself interim president of the country. He based this move on [Article 233](#) of the Venezuelan Constitution, which states that, if the president-elect is “absolutely absent before taking office”, the President of the National Assembly shall become interim president for thirty days during which a new general election can be organised. The [interpretation](#) was that Maduro was in fact ‘absent’ due to his usurpation of the presidential office.

Key dates around Guaidó's recognition

- **10/01/2019:** Maduro starts second term amidst growing international isolation
- **23/01/2019:** Guaidó declares himself interim president of Venezuela
- **26/01/2019:** US government recognises Guaidó as interim president; several EU member states present Maduro with an ultimatum calling for fresh elections; on behalf of the EU High Representative Mogherini [calls](#) for new elections, expresses support to legitimate National Assembly, and states that the EU stands ready to “take further actions, including on the issue of recognition”
- **31/01/2019:** [EP recognises](#) Guaidó as interim president of Venezuela; Council agrees to establish contact group including Europeans and Latin Americans seeking peaceful paths towards new presidential elections, but fails to agree on recognition of Guaidó
- **03/02/2019:** US President Trump [says](#) military intervention remains “an option”
- **04/02/2019:** European ultimatum ends and [15 EU members](#) recognise Guaidó
- **07/02/2019:** First meeting of the international contact group
- **18/02/2019:** delegation from EPP group denied access to Venezuela by Maduro regime
- **23/03/2019:** Up to 100 Russian troops arrive in Venezuela
- **28/03/2019:** Maduro government bars Guaidó from office for the next 15 years; EP adopts resolution [reiterating](#) support to Guaidó, calls for the full recognition of his diplomatic representatives as ambassadors, and urges Council to adopt further sanctions

In its subsequent resolutions, the EP repeatedly condemned the violence against peaceful protestors, human rights violations, and the deteriorating state of democracy. It urged Maduro to grant access to humanitarian assistance and eventually called for a new presidential election.

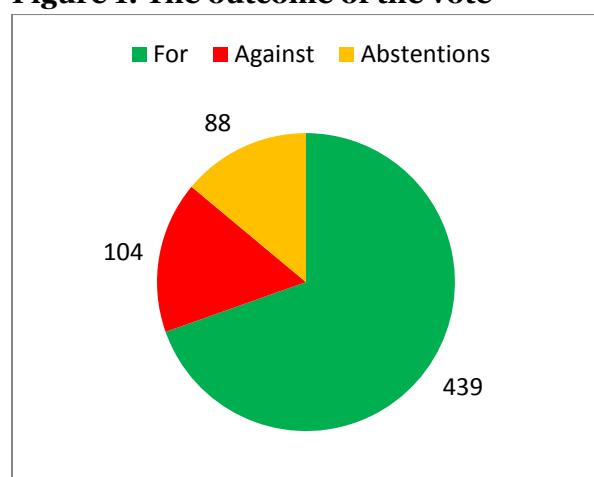
The most salient resolution so far was that on [the situation in Venezuela](#) adopted on 31 January 2019. The EP thereby recognised Guaidó as “the legitimate interim president” of Venezuela until “new free, transparent and credible presidential elections can be called” and urged the member states to follow suit. Although the EP cannot formally recognise foreign representatives on behalf of the EU, the vote was significant in two respects:

1. The resolution was adopted with a solid majority of 70% and came at a time when the Council narrowly failed to reach unanimity: On 31 January, the EU’s 28 foreign ministers met informally in Bucharest. The Italian government [reportedly](#) blocked a statement that would have paved the way towards a joint recognition of Guaidó. The reluctant camp also [included](#) the governments of a few other member states such as Greece, Cyprus and Slovakia.
2. The vote illustrates pan-European cleavages regarding interference in the domestic affairs of another state, pacifism, and Americanism. The recognition of Guaidó cannot be separated from the US recognition as well as uncertainty about a military intervention fuelled by the Trump administration’s repeated [statements](#) that ‘all options are on the table’.

2 Ideological cleavages

The motion for resolution was put forward by the EPP, the S&D, ALDE and the ECR.¹ It was adopted by a majority of 70%, while 16% opposed it and 14% abstained (see figure 1). The vote did not display clear-cut national divides. There were majorities in favour of the resolution in all EU member states with the exception of Sweden, where there was an even split. Instead, 82% of MEPs adhered to the line of their political group. A closer look at voting cohesion reveals interesting patterns (see figure 2).

Figure 1: The outcome of the vote



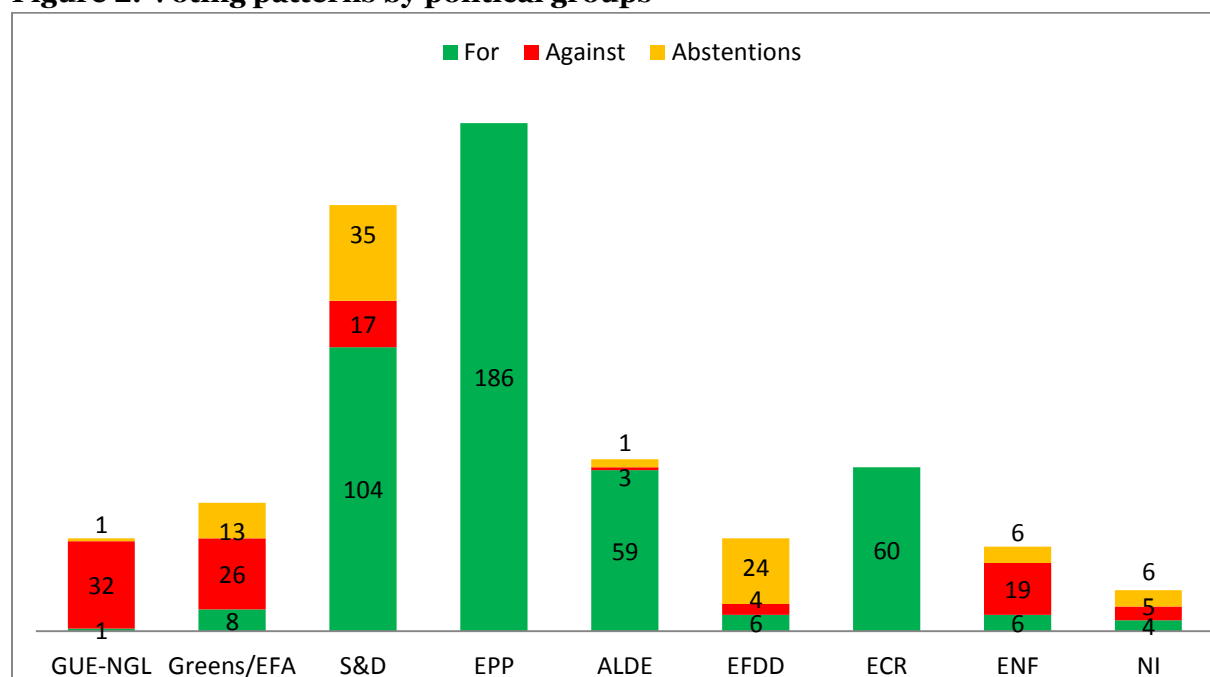
Source: VoteWatch Europe (numbers exclude absent MEPs and no-votes)

¹ For better readability, we use acronyms when referring to the EP’s political groups: European People’s Party (EPP), Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), Alliance of Liberals and Democrats in Europe (ALDE), European United Left – Nordic Green Left (GUE-NGL), Greens – European Free Alliance (Greens-EFA), Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD), Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF), Non-Inscrits (NI).

MEPs at the centre-right (EPP and ALDE) and right (ECR) were united in their call for the recognition of Guaidó. They presented Guaidó’s recognition as a legitimate, necessary and temporary step towards fresh elections and a peaceful transition of power.

Meanwhile, the left-wing GUE-NGL was united in its opposition based on the principle of non-interference, pacifism and anti-Americanism. As a member of the Portuguese Communist Party put it in the [EP plenary debate](#) of 31 January, Guaidó’s recognition was seen as backing an illegitimate coup, installing an American “puppet that is trying to get a hold of the country’s wealth”, and opening the door to military intervention. Similar arguments explain the [stance](#) of the Syriza-led Greek government – the only one in the EU that still explicitly backs Maduro.

Figure 2: Voting patterns by political groups



Source: VoteWatch Europe (numbers exclude absent MEPs and no-votes)

As usual, voting cohesion was low among the far-right ENF group, which opposed the resolution and the populist EFDD group, which abstained. The [division](#) within Italy’s governing coalition played an important role in this respect. While the Five Star Movement (EFDD) condemned the alleged ‘coup’ and rejected any interference that could lead to war, representatives of the far-right League (ENF) announced that Maduro’s presidency was over. Deviating from the positions of their respective political groups, the 18 MEPs from Italy’s governing parties abstained. At national level, they later [compromised](#) on a call for fresh elections without recognising Guaidó.

More striking was the breakdown of voting cohesion at the centre-left. 45% of the Greens/EFA rebelled against the group’s ‘no’ vote. In the plenary debate, Molly Scott Cato, a British member [said](#) that the group agreed with the general analysis, but insisted “on the right to self-determination and the right of the Venezuelan people to choose their own leader”. She called for dialogue and warned against self-interested foreign intervention. Even so, eight Green MEPs approved of the resolution.

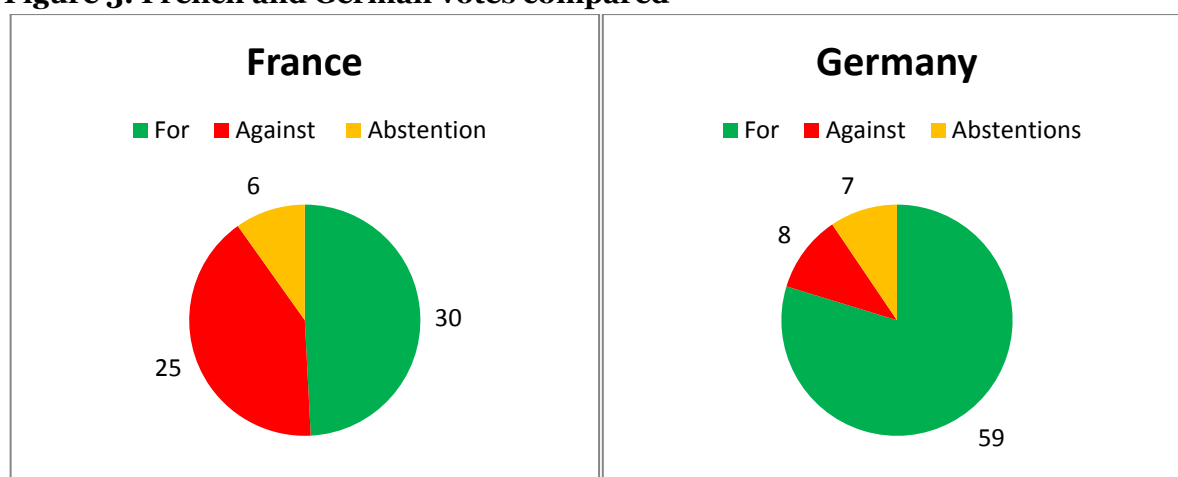
The fact that 33% of the S&D members rebelled is even more surprising given that the group had supported the motion. A comparison of the [drafts](#) put forward by the four political groups illustrates the differences. Those of the EPP, ECR and ALDE were quite similar while the [S&D one](#) clearly rejected “any proposal or attempt to resolve the crisis that might imply the use of

arms or violence”. It was also more cautious on the issue of recognition: Instead of immediately recognising Guaidó the draft stated that, if Maduro failed to call new elections, the EP would request the High Representative, the EU and the member states to recognise him. The joint motion included the call for a peaceful resolution of the crisis, but also recognised Guaidó. This compromise failed to convince one third of the S&D members.

3 Zooming in on France and Germany

A look at French and German contexts adds granularity to the described divides. Both governments were at the forefront of the group of member states pushing for Guaidó’s recognition. Yet, the French MEPs were divided on the EP resolution (see figure 3). The differences between France and Germany also have to do with the fact that Germany’s governing coalition is much more strongly represented in the EP (61 out of 96 German MEPs) than the French governing party La République en Marche (only 1 MEP and absent on the 31 January).

Figure 3: French and German votes compared

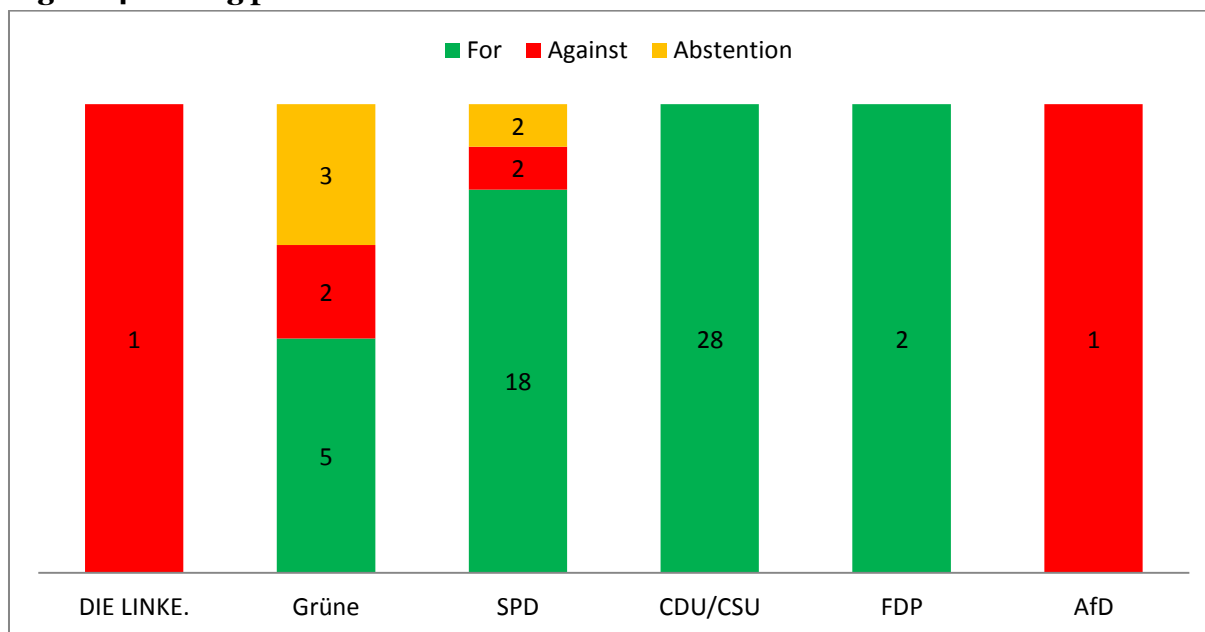


Source: VoteWatch Europe (numbers exclude absent MEPs and no-votes)

The ideological cleavages among French and German MEPs largely corresponded to the broader picture painted above: the centre right stood firmly behind the resolution while the far right and left opposed it (see figures 4 and 5). The [Bundestag debate](#) before the EP vote showed that the preferences of the German Left party and the right-wing Alternative for Germany were similar, even if their arguments differed. Both favoured of a position of neutrality and a focus on mediation. Left Party representatives stated that it would be wrong to side with “wall-builder Trump and fascist Bolsonaro”. Representatives of the Alternative for Germany, instead, deplored the government’s alleged failure to consult with the US, but also Russia and China, and argued that Germany lacked the means to influence the course of events beyond neutral mediation.

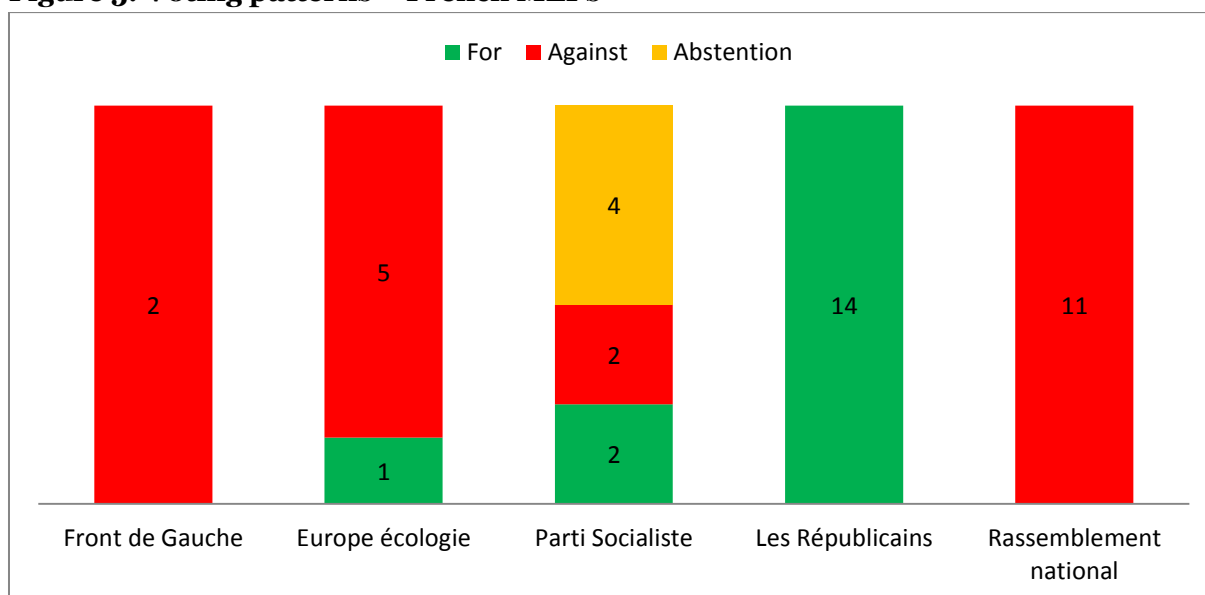
In both countries, the vote divided the centre left. In Germany, the Green party was more divided: Five MEPs defected from their political group’s line and voted in favour of the resolution. Rejecting any form of military intervention, some cautiously [argued](#) for a conditioned recognition of Guaidó. In France, the issue was more divisive for the Socialist Party. According to the party’s [website](#), it decided to abstain arguing that more diplomatic efforts should precede Guaidó’s recognition, which could foster more polarisation and violence. However, four Socialist MEPs deviated from this position (see figure 5).

Figure 4: Voting patterns – German MEPs



Source: VoteWatch Europe (selection of parties - numbers exclude absent MEPs and no-votes)

Figure 5: Voting patterns – French MEPs



Source: VoteWatch Europe (selection of parties - numbers exclude absent MEPs and no-votes)

4 The end of consensus at the centre

In the weeks following the EP's recognition of Guaidó, the situation in Venezuela escalated further and a contingent of Russian troops arrived in Venezuela on 28 March. In light of these developments, the described cleavages solidified and the centre-left regained some cohesion. The next [EP resolution](#) reiterated the support for Guaidó, urged the member states to recognise him as well as his diplomatic representatives, and descried the influence of the Cuban regime. In the vote on 28 March, this resolution only received a narrow majority of 53%. It had been tabled by the EPP, ALDE and the ECR without the support of the S&D group, which abstained in the vote.

A look at the initial EPP and ALDE motions explains this breakdown of consensus at the political centre. While the [EPP motion](#) criticised “the lack of any tangible result of the contact group so far”, ALDE had [proposed](#) stronger language urging “the international community to adopt all the necessary measures to implement the ‘responsibility to protect’”. S&D representatives [called](#) the dismissal of the diplomatic contact group “stupid and incoherent” and criticised the rejection of its amendment, which would have introduced a paragraph categorically rejecting any military intervention or use of violence in the Venezuelan crisis.

5 Conclusion and outlook

While the EP votes of 31 January and 28 March were specific to the evolving situation in Venezuela, they illustrate some pan-European cleavages on foreign policy issues:

- The centre right is more pro-American and less cautious regarding interference.
- The centre left struggles with interference, in particular when there is a possibility of or uncertainty regarding military intervention.
- The far left is openly anti-American and strongly rejects interference and the use of force.
- The more extreme far-right and populist parties in the EP are most divided, even if there is a tendency to converge around non-interference.

Beyond these findings, the EP’s recognition of Guaidó was, of course, mostly symbolic. It was a symbol directed at the international community, but it was also symbolic with a view to the future of EU foreign policy. The clear majority in favour of recognising Guaidó, cutting across MEPs of all member states, contrasted with the Council’s failure to reach unanimity. If qualified majority voting applied to EU foreign policy, as [proposed by the Commission](#), the Council could have sent a strong message, backed by significant pan-European parliamentary support. However, foreign policy remains a *domaine réservé* of the executive. The fact that one government used its veto power to prevent a common position shows, once more, how difficult it will be to reach the unanimity that would be needed for an extension of qualified majority voting.

In the next legislature, the EP should use its normative influence and contribute to the push for such an extension. Considering the expected increase in political fragmentation, it will certainly not be easier to gather majorities for this proposition. Still, it is the one key step that would strengthen the EU’s role in foreign and security policy – an aim that a [clear majority](#) of EU citizens support.