

# EUROSCEPTICS IN 159 THE 2014 EP ELECTIONS

PROTEST PARTIES MOBILIZED ON NATIONAL CLEAVAGES  
BETWEEN GLOBALIZATION WINNERS AND LOSERS

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FIIA BRIEFING PAPER 159 • June 2014



ULKOPOLIITTINEN INSTITUUTTI  
UTRIKESPOLITISKA INSTITUTET  
THE FINNISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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- In the May 2014 European Parliament elections, Eurosceptic parties mobilized on a new cleavage between the winners and losers of globalization, which mainstream parties have neglected.
- The Eurosceptic surge should not be regarded merely as populism or protest, but a legitimate articulation of concerns about the new economic underclass – the globalization losers.
- The articulation of the new cleavage varies according to domestic political contexts and traditions: in France, the Front National mobilized on themes of ethnic unity and national sovereignty; in Germany, the Alternative für Deutschland raised concerns over monetary independence in the eurozone, while in the UK, UKIP campaigned with anti-immigration and economic welfare themes.
- Since the EP elections, the Eurosceptics have seemed intent on polishing their images and on being perceived as respectable office-seeking parties, both in the EP and at domestic levels.
- Respectability requires a non-xenophobic agenda: in the EP, other Eurosceptics refused to cooperate with the FN due to the party's anti-semitic past; yet the AfD, mobilizing on a more economic agenda, managed to join the ECR group dominated by British Conservatives, while UKIP managed to reform its EFD group.

The European Union research programme  
The Finnish Institute of International Affairs

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Before the European Parliament elections in May 2014, there was prolific debate along the lines of “Will things be different this time?”. For the first time, the May 2014 elections gave voters the chance to influence the election of the Commission President, an amendment to the powers of the EP included in the Lisbon Treaty. Moreover, it was presumed that voters would be keen on evaluating incumbents on their performance in the economic crisis, which was supposed to have Europeanized the elections by raising awareness of the interconnections between domestic and supranational politics in the EU. For these reasons, and more, it was presumed that the May 2014 EP elections would be a watershed moment. So what transpired?

The elections proved different in one crucial sense. Eurosceptic parties gained a landslide victory across the continent: notably, victories occurred in France, with the far-right Front National (FN) taking 25 % of the votes, as well as in Britain, where the UK Independence Party (UKIP) garnered 26.8 %. A noteworthy feature of the election results in both of these countries is that parties with 25 % or more of the votes are no longer marginal, but potential government parties.

Hence, what changed is not that Eurosceptic parties surfaced, but that these parties are increasingly in a position to become major players in domestic and European governance – a development that can have fundamental consequences for European politics. Accordingly, the Eurosceptic landslide should not be regarded as merely a protest against the EU establishment, but as symptomatic of a wider transformation in European political structures, brought about by integration in the spheres of economy, politics and culture. This integration has produced new, latent political groups – globalization winners and losers – who have been waiting for their cause to be articulated. Mainstream parties have long failed to see this, but protest parties have skillfully utilized the new latent cleavage by mobilizing the group of globalization losers. This economic underclass, threatened by both increasing economic

competition and cultural diversity in Europe, has produced the Eurosceptic surge – which should, accordingly, not be regarded merely as populism or protest, but as legitimate representative politics.

This paper compares debates on the European Parliament elections conducted between 2009 and 2014 in three European countries: France, the UK and Germany. It shows that the success of the Eurosceptics cannot be explained by the rise of fundamentally new issues or campaigning styles. Rather, the crisis has aggravated old national debates and cleavages, on which protest parties have now mobilized. France, the UK and Germany all share the structural potential of globalization winners and losers; yet the national political contexts and traditions cause the latent dynamic to play out differently in the three countries.

## Globalization winners and losers: A new structural cleavage in European politics

Until recently, national communities have been treated as black boxes, acting coherently in the face of external adjustment shocks, such as economic, cultural and political intergration<sup>2</sup>. Yet different groups among national communities adjust differently. In sectoral terms, traded sectors and sheltered sectors of the economy have different preferences with regard to economic globalization. In factorial terms, individuals with more skills have more to gain from globalization than those with low skills<sup>3</sup>. Globalization has hence divided populations into globalization winners and losers, creating new latent political groups with not-yet-articulated

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1 The author would like to extend thanks to FIIA intern Natalie Pawlowski, who compiled the dataset on the 2014 EP elections on which this paper is based.

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2 Rokkan, Stein (1999): *State Formation, Nation-building, and Mass Politics in Europe: The Theory of Stein Rokkan*. Oxford University Press. Lipset, Seymour Martin & Rokkan, Stein (1967): *Party systems and voter alignments: cross-national perspectives*. Free Press.

3 Scheve, Kenneth & Slaughter, Matthew J. (2004): ‘Economic Insecurity and the Globalization of Production’. *American Journal of Political Science* 48(4), pp. 662–674. Walter, Stefanie (2010): Globalization and the Welfare State: ‘Testing the Microfoundations of the Compensation Hypothesis.’ *International Studies Quarterly* 54 (2), pp. 403–426.

specific interests<sup>4</sup>. Traditional parties mobilizing along traditional axes of contention – left–right and liberal–conservative – have had a hard time addressing the new latent groups, whereas protest parties have succeeded in taking up the cause, particularly of globalization losers: people who feel frustrated by the mounting competition over jobs in open economies, threatened by the increasing cultural diversity, and worried about the simultaneous deterioration of conventional structures of compensation, such as welfare states.

Resistance to globalization can be articulated via two distinct logics: economic and cultural. Importantly, it is argued<sup>5</sup> that if incumbents are unable to provide electorates with economic alternatives, it is more likely that protest will be articulated via the cultural logic. Simply put: the less the government is able to provide welfare and economic growth, the more likely it is that protest parties will mobilize on a strong anti–immigration, even racist agenda. Hence, it may be expected that the articulation of Eurosceptic protest in the EU varies according to the economic situation of the country. Another reason to assume this would be that the class of economic losers is, quite simply, likely to be bigger in countries with badly performing economies. In addition, countries with less compensation for welfare losses, like the UK, are expected to have a larger economic underclass than traditionally strong welfare states.

In sum, four main factors stand out as potential explanations for the success of Eurosceptic parties in the recent elections. The first is the domestic economic situation, which affects the potential for protest parties by creating varying degrees of contention between “winners and losers”, and by producing different articulations of the conflict. The second is the level of compensation that the country provides for globalization losers. Third, the domestic political situation, with factors such as electoral cycles and political culture, affects the form and

content of mobilization. Finally, the perceived influence of the country in the EU context may be a factor. If electorates perceive their government as weak vis–à–vis other governments and EU institutions, they may want to punish incumbents more than if the country is perceived as a leader with substantial influence.

### **France: FN mobilizing on ethnic unity and national sovereignty**

France was one of the countries with a big Eurosceptic wave in the May 2014 elections, as the right–wing nationalist Front National (FN), led by Marine Le Pen, took over 25 % of the votes, compared to just 6.3 % in 2009. Mainstream parties, on the other hand, were punished: the UMP, the ruling party from 2007 to 2012, attained 20.8 % of the vote, compared to 27.8 % in 2009, while the Socialist Party, the incumbent party headed by President François Hollande, only scored 14 %, compared to 16.5 % in 2009.

The dynamics of French EP election debates revolve around three key issues. First, even prior to 2009, French society featured a division between globalization winners and losers, corresponding to attitudes towards Europe: young, well–educated and culturally liberal people have been shown to be more pro–European than older, conservative and less educated people<sup>6</sup>. Importantly, in the 2009 elections, mainstream parties failed to acknowledge the EU–critical potential of the latent class of globalization losers. Rather, mainstream parties debated substantive issues within an overall pro–integration framework and were in favour of the Lisbon Treaty. Peripheral parties, however, rejected the Treaty, as had the French people in a referendum over its predecessor, the Constitutional Treaty, in 2005. Hence the signs of Euroscepticism were already apparent in 2009: yet mainstream parties chose to take the overall pro–European framework as a given and

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4 Kriesi, Hanspeter; Grande, Edgar; Lachat Roman; Dolezal Martin, Bornschier Simon & Frey Timotheos (2008): *West European Politics in the Age of Globalization*. Cambridge University Press. Kriesi, Hanspeter; Grande, Edgar; Dolezal Martin; Helbling, Marc; Höglinger, Dominic; Hütter, Swen & Wuest, Bruno (2012): *Political Conflict in Western Europe*. Cambridge University Press.

5 Kriesi et al. 2008; 2012

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6 Koopmans, Ruud (2007): ‘Who inhabits the European public sphere? Winners and losers, supporters and opponents in Europeanised political debates.’ *European Journal of Political Research* 46, pp. 183–210. Petithomme, Mathieu (2007): *Les européens face au miroir turc. Une analyse comparée des attitudes à l’égard de l’adhésion de la Turquie à l’Union Européenne*, Institute for Political Studies (MA Thesis), Paris.





Nigel Farage (left), Marine Le Pen and Bernd Lucke.  
(Photos: Euro Realist Newsletter/Flickr, The Global  
Panorama/Flickr and Blu-news.org/Flickr.)

neglected the steadily strengthening scepticism among voters – a mistake which the FN, clearly, did not make.

In France, Euroscepticism has a dual focus. The first strand, *souverainisme*, criticizing the EU for compromising the esteemed sovereignty of France, appeals particularly to supporters of the extreme right. The other, anti-neoliberal strand of criticism is more pronounced among younger, better-educated and left-leaning voters, who criticize the EU for promoting a neoliberal model of integration, which they see as orthogonally opposed to the French idea of social integration. In the May 2014 elections, French protest votes were clearly cast along the first, *souverainiste* line of criticism. This may stem from several sources. First, the Eurosceptic electorate may, for socioeconomic reasons, identify with the far right more than the far left. Second, the incumbent socialist government has, under the leadership of François Hollande, tried to articulate criticism towards the EU precisely along anti-neoliberal lines: *intégration solidaire* has become his catchphrase. Yet he has been notoriously unsuccessful in promoting any solidaristic integration, and has had to give in to German-led reforms: instead of increasing state activism in economic policymaking – the French preference – the EU has decided to weaken it by binding member states to strict new rules of economic governance; instead of setting up solidaristic, permanent aid mechanisms for debtor countries, the eurozone crisis has tied these countries into strict fiscal discipline as a condition for any aid. These reforms are orthogonally opposed

to French preferences and the French government has thus far failed to promote its idea of *intégration solidaire*. Yet, the fact that it has claimed ownership of this strand of criticism may have fed into the FN agenda, encouraging the challenger party to further emphasize the *souverainiste* position.

The failure of François Hollande to promote the French agenda at the EU level leads to the third salient issue in the French EU debate: the self-image of a strong, influential France in the EU context. Yet the economic crisis has arguably weakened the French *grandeur*. Nicolas Sarkozy managed to secure a position alongside Angela Merkel in the core decision-making duo of the eurozone; François Hollande has not succeeded to do the same. Rather, the weak position of the French president may, if anything, have increased the power and influence of the Northern creditor coalition in the Union. Hence France, and the French, have every reason to feel like integration losers in the EU context, providing fertile ground for the Eurosceptic FN. A further cause for the FN's clear victory may be found in the French presidential political system. Namely, in countries such as Britain, mainstream parties may try and contain the popular vote by promising a referendum on any major reforms in the EU. In France, such an option is out of reach because the importance of a strong president for maintaining political balance makes a referendum too risky. And yet in French public opinion, perhaps encouraged by the British example, a referendum is increasingly seen as the only plausible tool for gaining public legitimacy for major EU reforms. Hence,

France finds itself in an impossible situation where the domestic political system makes it hard for the government to gain popular legitimacy, thus feeding into the radical-democratic tone of the protest party discourse.

In France, as elsewhere, mainstream parties have attempted to contain the populists by moving closer to the positions of the challengers. When in power, the UMP's Sarkozy repositioned himself on immigration and crime issues to better match the FN agenda, known for its anti-immigration and xenophobic tones. The now incumbent Socialists have tried to do the same, via the economic channel, by promising tax cuts for the lower paid. Yet President François Hollande's inability to deliver on an economic policy that would pull France out of its current slump may have served to fuel the protest. Mr Hollande has had no success in turning around the European-level austerity agenda, and in 2014 – just prior to the elections – was finally faced with no choice but to implement domestic austerity as well. In February 2014, he duly announced a “responsibility package”, amounting to some 50 billion euro in spending cuts. The welfare state retrenchement that is only months away is sure to have fed into the protest vote.

### **Germany: AfD raising concerns over monetary independence**

Germany was an outlier in the May 2014 European elections: its incumbent parties were not punished, but rewarded. The Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the main coalition party led by Chancellor Angela Merkel, won 35.3 % of the votes, compared to 30.7 % in 2009, and its coalition partner, the social democratic SPD, also gained 27.3 %, up from 20.8 % in 2009. Yet a significant change, breaking the almost universal, long-term pro-European consensus, also took place in the German party landscape: an EU-critical protest party, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), won 7 % of the vote. The AfD's success was helped thanks to a recent ruling by the German Constitutional Court, scrapping the 3 % threshold needed to acquire seats in the European Parliament. Yet the AfD's rise is also indicative of a challenger discourse that is emerging in Germany on the benefits of membership of the EU and, more specifically, of the euro.

The first noteworthy feature in the German EP election results is that Eurosceptics won relatively few votes in Germany. How come? With regard to the central hypothesis of this paper – the existence of a large class of globalization losers in countries with big Eurosceptic victories – this group may have already punished the incumbents in Germany back in 2009. Namely, in the 2009 elections the SPD – also in coalition with the CDU at that time – lost some 11.2 percentage points on mainly domestic grounds: it was held responsible for the so-called Schröder reforms, which created a two-tier labour market in Germany, with many low-paid jobs. Hence, the incumbent punishment may have already played out five years ago.

The mainstream parties were, however, able to contain the popular discontent, perhaps on account of Germany's history and the ensuing caution among the electorate with regard to protest parties, particularly ones mobilizing on an anti-immigration or xenophobic agenda. There is much more room for challengers to mobilize on an economic agenda, however – and this is precisely what Bernd Lucke and his Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) are doing.

Mr Lucke, leader of the AfD and a professor of macroeconomics, is driving the German Eurosceptic front with one overriding theme: the euro. Thus, instead of emphasizing the impact of the EU on national, cultural or ethnic unity, as do the FN in France and UKIP in the UK, the AfD focuses on the impact of the common currency on the economic interests of Germany. A major concern in German public debate on the economic crisis has been its role as a victim paymaster for the profligate southern member states. The German story has been one of a loss of sovereignty with the Deutschmark and taxpayer losses in the face of imminent inflation in the eurozone, not to mention the feared fiscal transfers to southern euro states. In short, a strong and stable currency is for historical reasons an important issue in the German debate, and the suggestion that the euro endangers this has potentially strong resonance with the German public. Hence, the euro crisis may have provided just the fertile ground that the already existing economic underclass needed to mobilize. For historical reasons, this could not happen along cultural lines but had to wait for an economic-monetary cleavage to emerge – which the crisis provided, and the AfD utilized.

Yet the moderate nature of the Eurosceptic surge in Germany may result from the fact that, as a whole, Germany can perceive itself as an integration winner rather than loser. Germany has clearly gained in influence during the euro crisis – being the strongest economy in the eurozone with its institutions, such as the Bundesbank, serving as models for equivalent EU institutions, Germany has been able to have its own way over important reforms. The Germans know this, and consequently do not have the same incentives for protesting against the EU as the French, for instance. Secondly, in economic terms, export-oriented Germany has benefited considerably from eurozone membership. German banks gained by lending to southern Europe and, with the readily available credit, consumers in these countries bought German exports. This is a reality that German political leaders now increasingly understand and articulate, and their vital interest in keeping the southern countries in the euro and economically afloat may have fed into the recent German willingness to debate a political union, even with some mechanisms of the loathed fiscal capacity.

Finally, the legalistic tone of German EU debates has helped politicians contain popular discontent. Namely, in Germany, the Constitutional Court is a prominent player in defining the limits of German sovereignty, and hence appropriate levels of integration. The political union, for example, is not discussed in political terms only, but as a question of institutional rules and legality. The role of the Constitutional Court arguably helps German decision-makers to explain the ultimately political decisions with “neutral” legal rules. Moreover, the blame-shifting does not stop there: while reliance on the Constitutional Court is an important instrument for domestic legitimation for German policymakers, the requirement of having the court’s ruling on any major EU reforms arguably hinders the reform process and allows crisis management to be effectively outsourced to yet another non-political body, the European Central Bank.

### **The UK: UKIP campaigning with anti-immigration**

The central tenet of this paper, namely that Europe is now torn not only between “left or right” but between “closed or open” – is nowhere as clear as in Britain. The country stands perilously close to the EU exit, with Conservative Prime Minister David

Cameron having promised an in/out referendum in 2017. The May 2014 elections reinforced the already Eurosceptic tone of British politics when, for the first time in history, a party other than Labour or Conservative scored highest in a British election: the right-wing Eurosceptic UK Independence Party, UKIP, won over 26.8 % of the vote, leaving the Conservatives with 23.3 % and Labour with 24.7 %. Political Euroscepticism is nothing new in Britain, however: UKIP already garnered 16.1 % of the vote in the 2009 elections. Yet Britain’s incumbent politicians may be losing their grip on the protest, and if that happens, the consequences might be dramatic even in the short term, as the country faces parliamentary elections in 2015.

The first thing to note about British Euroscepticism is Britain’s self-image as a strong and independent island nation, with significant ties all over the globe, not only or even mainly in Europe. For Britain, Europe represents merely one instance of international cooperation much like its membership of other international organizations. Importantly, such memberships are voluntary contracts that must yield clear benefits for the involved, in order to keep being endorsed. In Britain, the benefits derived from EU integration are perceived mostly in terms of the Single Market, in the shape of economic advantages stemming from free trade; and in economic terms, the EU has in recent years failed to deliver. The British are suffering from stagnant wages, low compensation in terms of welfare state services and benefits, high unemployment and the perceived threat of increased migration. Britain was also severely affected by the recent economic crisis. As a liberal market economy, its mechanisms for cushioning itself against external shocks are less robust than in other countries. Between 2007 and 2010, unemployment in Britain increased more than in France, for instance, but British unemployment benefits stand at considerably lower levels, and are deteriorating further. Moreover, the economic malaise is associated with the EU in the minds of British voters, providing leverage for Britain’s Eurosceptics.

UKIP has hence mobilized on a two-tier agenda. First, it emphasizes that without the EU, the UK would be free to negotiate bilateral trade deals for itself, notably with the US, delivering more growth and welfare than deals negotiated by or with the EU. Second, leaving the EU would mean – according to

UKIP – less competition for jobs, as Britain could once again govern its own borders and control the influx of migrant workers from the eastern EU states in particular. A third factor that has fuelled UKIP’s agenda is an increasing perception among the British electorate of a wedge between the elites and ordinary people, which was already in evidence in the 2009 EP elections. In 2009 a prominent issue in the election debate was a domestic scandal over MPs submitting excessive claims for benefits. The Euro-sceptic insurgents, notably UKIP, fuelled the popular discontent by tying the domestic fraud issues to some Brussels-bashing as a waste of public money.

The EU debate in Britain currently revolves around the issue of a referendum on a British EU exit, which Conservative Prime Minister Cameron has promised to hold in 2017. Referendums, as a form of direct democracy, “listening to the people”, are high on populist party agendas across Europe. The UK is the first country where the political establishment has chosen to respond to the populist challenge by really endorsing the idea.

Yet in promising a referendum, David Cameron is not merely making concessions to UKIP but also to a segment of his own party. Divided into free trade liberals and national conservatives, UKIP’s rise has torn the Tory segments further apart, with the conservative right possibly leaking to UKIP. Mr Cameron has tried to pacify the conservative Tories with his referendum pledge, a move that his critics judge as too risky for the nation as a whole. Cameron’s big idea has been to first “renegotiate the terms of the UK’s EU membership” and only then to put the in/out question to a referendum. Yet Cameron seems to be failing at this task at the moment, taking Britain ever further away from the EU core. Since the May EP elections, for instance, he has been intent upon preventing the nomination of Jean-Claude Juncker, the EPP candidate and a renowned federalist, as Commission president. He has found himself with practically no allies, however: other centre-right EU governments are allying with Angela Merkel in backing Juncker, whereas centre-left governments, under the leadership of François Hollande of France and Matteo Renzi of Italy, have now formed a new coalition backing Juncker on the proviso that he will, if elected, act to loosen Commission interpretations of EMU fiscal rules – a move that would benefit debtor countries such as France and Italy. Moreover, Cameron managed to alienate himself

against Merkel’s CDU back in 2009, when British Conservatives left the EPP group in the European Parliament and formed a new conservative group. Hence, sceptics in Britain see Mr Cameron’s chances of renegotiations weakening by the day.

## Conclusions

In domestic terms, the consequences of the May 2014 Eurosceptic landslide are likely to play out differently across different countries. In France, the Front National will have its sights firmly set on the presidential elections in 2017. With this goal in mind, FN leader, Marine Le Pen, is busy transforming her party’s extreme-right image into one of a respectable government party. Based on past occurrences, it is unclear how success in the EP elections will play out domestically: in the 2002 presidential elections, Jean-Marie Le Pen scored 17.8 % against Jacques Chirac, and yet two years later, the FN gained only 9.8 % in the EP elections. Yet, being a woman in her forties, Ms Le Pen may be received more favourably among moderate middle-class voters than her father. Yet at the EP level, the far-right xenophobic image of the FN is proving a burden for Ms Le Pen: she recently failed to establish a new EP group – her outspoken priority after the election victory – as other Eurosceptic parties refused to cooperate, due to the FN’s anti-semitic past.

In Germany, the AfD has enjoyed only moderate support to date. Yet it is not only the number of seats, but also the agenda-setting power that counts in politics, and it is in this capacity that the AfD may, in the short term, be influential. Namely, while any debate in Europe on a eurozone breakdown has so far revolved around a potential “loser’s exit” – an economically failing country such as Greece could be forced to leave – under the AfD’s leadership, a debate on a “winner’s exit” could be fostered in Germany. The AfD’s agenda has been precisely to question the benefits of eurozone membership for Germany: should such discourse gain strength, it could conceivably be supported by citizens in other northern creditor countries such as Finland.

Moreover, if developments elsewhere in Europe – such as in the UK – fracture the Union’s coherence, the threshold for debating an exit might be lowered in Germany, too. At the EP level, the AfD managed to join the European Conservatives and Reformists



(ECR), dominated by David Cameron's Conservatives. The AfD, together with other Eurosceptics such as the True Finns, who recently joined the ECR group, would thus seem keen to rid itself of a populist or protest image and become a respectable, office-seeking force to be reckoned with.

In the UK, the short-term consequences of the May 2014 elections might prove dramatic, with parliamentary elections ahead in 2015. The crucial question for British EU politics is whether the party that wins in 2015 will hold a referendum on British EU membership. Based on the EP elections, some 60 % of British people back a party in favour of a referendum, UKIP or the Conservatives. Yet in Britain's electoral system, it is unclear how these results will play out in the parliamentary elections. Labour was a winner in the May EP elections, up from 15.3 % in 2009 to 24.7 % in 2014: were this trend to continue and should Labour succeed in 2015, a referendum would look less likely, as party leader Ed Miliband has so far refused to support it. If David Cameron somehow succeeds in his risky gamble to "renegotiate the terms of British EU membership", Britain might avoid an exit even if the Tories or UKIP rule after 2015. Yet his success looks doubtful at the moment as he has alienated himself against other EU leaders in the contest over the next Commission president.

Meanwhile, UKIP leader Nigel Farage has managed to reform his Europe of Freedom and Democracy group in the EP, thus securing an influential position for its anti-establishment members. Mr Farage's success, compared to the failure of the FN's Marine Le Pen, in forming an EP group is indicative of the fact that in contemporary Europe, a protest framed in economic terms is more legitimate than one framed in ethnic or racist terms. UKIP may have its sights set on governing positions – and office-seeking parties cannot be perceived as xenophobic, a lesson Marine Le Pen of the FN has just learned.

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ISBN 978-951-769-423-0

ISSN 1795-8059

Cover: Tiago Cabral/Flickr

Language editing: Lynn Nikkanen

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