

SNAPSHOT

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Ireland: it's musical chairs and the seats are moving

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While debate rages about an extension to Brexit and Article 50 and whether or not the UK will participate in May's European elections, Ireland is going through its own political transition. Bronagh O'Hagan from FTI Consulting Brussels discusses the changing political landscape.

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If the UK doesn't participate, many Member States will have more seats to play for in the upcoming European elections. Twenty-seven seats are set to be reallocated. The impact on Ireland will be unique. While the Republic could gain an extra two seats, the north would lose three and leave the European Parliament altogether.

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With this potential new allocation, Ireland would have a total of 13 MEPs. The polls currently show that Fianna Fáil will be the main beneficiary. They are currently set to gain two or three seats and would most likely sit in the liberal grouping in the European Parliament (ALDE). Fine Gael (of the EPP, the centre right group), will probably hold their ground with four seats. Sinn Féin (of GUE/NGL, the far-left group) are set to drop one seat in the south, which would give them a total of two. The Green Party, on the other hand, are expected to make a comeback by gaining at least one seat. The remainder are expected to go to a cluster of existing Independents.

As campaigning starts, we are seeing a major repositioning of Irish politics with parties from the south taking on the issues of the north in a new way. In effect, northern constituents

could be represented indirectly by MEPs from the south. Notably, we are starting to see the bigger parties, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, encroach on Sinn Féin's previously held claim of being the only all-Ireland party. The recent news that Fianna Fáil, a centre-right party, merged with the north's Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP), traditionally affiliated with Irish Labour, has surprised many. This news was further compounded when Mark Durkan, the SDLP's former leader, was announced as Fine Gael's Dublin constituency candidate. In addition to these changes the fact that three sitting TDs (Members of the Irish Parliament) are running in the European elections, and the subsequent possibility of corresponding by-elections, is adding to calls for a national general election.

All of this has snowballed in the immediate run-up to the anticipated Brexit deadline of 29 March. Whether Brexit happens or not, we are seeing some fundamental shifts in Irish politics and in how parties are positioning themselves. There is clearly a play to take the lead for the all-Ireland challenges that negotiations have brought to the fore, such as peace and stability, cross-border trade or the reunification of the island.

In a Europe wide election that could create some major waves and changes, Ireland represents a calming influence overall. However, where this dynamic could be more interesting is what happens in the north. The all-Ireland play and confusion about whether or not the UK will participate in May's elections could determine what role these extra seats will fulfil. Will they represent northern interests? And if so, who are the constituents?



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