



European elections 2024

A turning point for EU integration?

Carme Colomina, Sophia Russack, Héctor Sánchez Margalef and Ilke Toygür (Eds.)

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The elections to the European Parliament have commonly been considered “second-order” elections. This is not only because European citizens might view them as less important, or because of lower than normal turnouts. It is also because European elections have often been fought on national issues, with domestic debates dominating the campaigns and voters inclined to use them to punish the governing party and its action in the various member states.

We can expect to see a repeat of some of these dynamics in the elections of June 6th-9th, 2024, when over 370 million citizens from the 27 member states are eligible to vote to elect 720 MEPs, who together will represent 450 million citizens. Since 1979, the year of the first elections to the European Parliament by universal suffrage (and the world’s first multinational elections), the chamber has grown in importance in the institutional framework of the European Union (EU).

Since the Lisbon Treaty came into force, the parliament has formed an intrinsic part of the EU’s ordinary legislative procedure (codecision). Along with the Council of the European Union, it is responsible for amending and adopting most European legislation. The figure is variable and debatable, but it is estimated that 70% of national legislation originates from EU decisions.

There are obvious reasons not to consider the European elections a second-order contest. Still, Brussels and Strasbourg remain distant cities for a good part of the people, even if the issues on the European political agenda are becoming increasingly less so. The politicisation of European affairs, and the steady rise of clashing views on them, is a growing and irrepressible phenomenon. No longer are the policies that emerge from Brussels deemed good by nature. Instead, they are a target of protest, as any local, regional or national public policy might be. This shows a level of maturity that every democratic system must reach and, therefore, it helps to build a much-desired *demos* and European political arena.

The politicisation of European affairs, and the steady rise of clashing views on them, is a growing and irrepressible phenomenon. No longer are the policies that emerge from Brussels deemed good by nature. Instead, they are a target of protest, as any local, regional or national public policy might be. This shows a level of maturity that every democratic system must reach and, therefore, it helps to build a much-desired demos and European political arena.

Examples abound. The recent protests against the European Commission's green agenda put a halt to legislative initiatives like reducing the use of pesticides in the EU. A brake has also been placed on opening up to agricultural imports from Ukraine in the wake of demonstrations by the farming sector in multiple European capitals, including Brussels itself. A confrontation is beginning to emerge, then, between the green agenda, fighting climate change and biodiversity protection as promoted by the EU and the price to pay by the sectors most vulnerable to the green transition, in this case the agricultural sector.

Protest over initiatives and the politicisation of matters that form the European political agenda cover other areas, too. The defence of Ukraine requires a greater joint spending effort, which causes misgivings among those who balk at common fiscal endeavours, but which is welcomed by those who would like to move forward with a defence industry capable of rising to the geopolitical challenges that beset the EU. Migration issues continue to spark intense political and social debate in a good many member states. And the approval of a new pact on migration and asylum has failed to translate into greater solidarity among EU partners. The debate over the EU's own resources, and the fiscal effort it entails, continues to set the "frugal" states against the proponents of greater fiscal integration. No key concern on the European agenda today escapes the dynamics of politicisation and Europeanisation of the political debate.

The outcome of the elections to the European Parliament will determine the future of the legislative process on many of these issues. Pro-European forces will argue that the successful management of recent crises needs a structural push to further European integration. Nationalist and Eurosceptic forces, meanwhile, will milk disgruntlement like that of the European farming sector to call for the transfer of powers back to the member states in the face of the "Brussels monster", as Hans Magnus Enzensberger dubbed it. Legislative progress will depend on the majorities that form in the new parliament, and on the nature and composition of the new European Commission.

This monograph, the result of joint reflection led by CIDOB, CEPS and IE, and in the framework of the DigiDem-EU project funded by the European Commission's Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme, sets out some of the most salient thematic areas ahead of the elections in June and, in the second part, describes the electoral outlook in various member states.

The first part, edited by Héctor Sánchez Margalef and Carme Colomina, researchers at CIDOB, tackles issues such as the future of the European green agenda (Ana García Juanatey and Andrea Noferini), the economic debates in the EU (Víctor Burguete), the geography of anti-Europeanism and the urban-rural divide (Agustí Fernández de Losada and Marta Galceran), the role of young people in the EU (Javier Carbonell), the migration phenomenon (Francesco Pasetti), defence (Daniel Fiott), foreign policy and enlargement (Luís de Lossada and Ilke Toygür), disinformation (Carme Colomina) and the future of European integration after the elections in June (Héctor Sánchez Margalef).

The second part, edited by Sophia Russack, a researcher at CEPS, and Ilke Toygür, director of the IE Global Policy Center, brings together leading representatives of European think tanks to provide insights from Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Poland, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Austria, Finland, Ireland and Estonia.

SECTION I

THE IMPACT OF THE ELECTIONS ON THE POLITICAL AGENDA

- AFTER THE ELECTIONS: MORE OR LESS EUROPE?
Héctor Sánchez Margalef
- WILL THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS HAVE AN IMPACT ON THE EU'S ENLARGEMENT AGENDA?
Ilke Toygür and Luis de Lossada i Gallart
- MIGRATION, ELECTIONS AND THE EUROPEAN UNION OF TOMORROW
Francesco Pasetti
- DARK CLOUDS ON THE HORIZON: THE UNCERTAIN FUTURE OF THE EU'S GREEN AGENDA
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- ELECTIONS UNDER SUSPICION: THE CONSTANT THREAT OF DISINFORMATION
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- THE GEOGRAPHY OF ANTI-EUROPEANISM
Marta Galceran-Vercher and Agustí Fernández de Losada
- THE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS AND THE EU'S FUTURE ECONOMIC CAPACITY
Víctor Burguete
- DEFENCE AS A CORE PILLAR OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION
Daniel Fiott
- IS THE EUROPEAN UNION YOUNG?
Javier Carbonell

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The story of European construction is one of a gradual transfer of national sovereignty to a supranational entity. But this process of integration has happened in fits and starts, and moments of crisis have raised questions about the logic of an ever closer union. Still, many of these crises have resulted in further integration (Schimmelfennig, 2024). In practice, the transfer of sovereignty has allowed the Europeans to address common challenges in an increasingly competitive world as a bloc. On their own, the member states would not have the same capacity to assert their interests and mould the world according to their rules. As the saying goes, there are only two types of country in Europe: small countries and small countries that have not yet realised they are small.

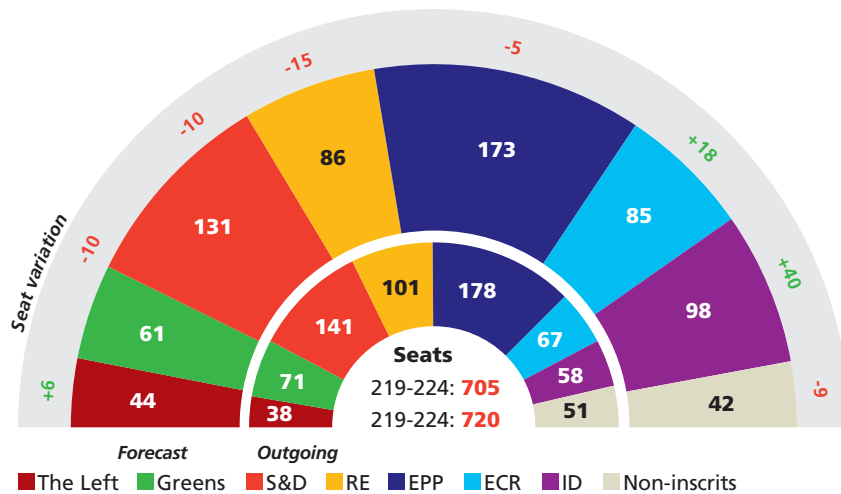
But the elections to the European Parliament in June may mark a break with this integrating logic; not as a consequence of a crisis (in democracy, voting is never a crisis), but because the political forces that will be regarded as winners are reluctant to continue committing to the transfer of powers. And because they do not agree with the logic of supranational cooperation as a guiding principle of the European Union (EU).

Brussels, the capital of Europe (and go-to scapegoat for the problems of the member states, as if they had no hand in the decisions that are taken there), has become the symbol of an EU perceived as a regulatory behemoth over the course of its 70-year history. And certain political forces, which have sworn enmity to this image of Brussels (Enzensberger, 2014), could be bolstered at the ballot boxes in the upcoming European elections in June.

The polls show the two parliamentary groups on the radical and extreme right obtaining the best results, relatively speaking, even aiming at record shares of the vote. [According to these election surveys](#), Identity and Democracy (ID) could be the third-largest group in the European Parliament for the first time in its history; and the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) would vie for fourth place with the liberals. With these results, the very idea of the EU and the way it functions would be at risk.

Possible distribution of seats by political group in the European Parliament after the elections of June 2024

Moments of crisis have raised questions about the logic of an ever closer union. Yet many of these crises have resulted in further integration.



Note: The chart shows the following political groups: The Left; Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D); The Greens/European Free Alliance; Renew Europe (liberals); European People's Party (EPP); European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR); Identity and Democracy (ID); Non-Inscrits (NI). Source: Compiled by CIDOB based on projections published in Cunningham et al. "A sharp right turn: A forecast for the 2024 European Parliament elections", ECFR, January 2024

Transfer or recovery of sovereignty?

The question of how much sovereignty the member states must retain or recover from the EU and how much must continue to be transferred to the EU institutions is a fault line between political families. Moving from left to right across the spectrum, below are the views of the European political parties and groups.

The Party of the European Left (PEL), which encompasses the radical left parties, is not averse to transferring more sovereignty to the EU, even if the group does call for a different kind of union. In its [manifesto](#) it advocates extending the EU's powers in sensitive areas such as taxation and regulation of artificial intelligence (AI). Other proposals include a permanent investment mechanism or an EU regulation on labour rights. The European Left invokes the [conclusions](#) of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) regarding a revision of the treaties to secure a more democratic, transparent union that is accountable and socially cohesive. It even calls for granting the European Parliament the right to initiate legislation.

The Greens' election [manifesto](#), for its part, argues that the European Union is the key level for climate and environmental policy. They want a democratic, feminist Europe that safeguards human rights and that is why they too demand a different EU: a federal Europe with enhanced powers. The Greens also cite the CoFoE as a source of legitimacy.

The Party of European Socialists (PES) defends the need to enhance EU powers and refers to this in the first point of its [manifesto](#) when it calls for full implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights

or a strengthened European Labour Authority. Other proposals from this group that would include the transfer of more powers are a permanent European investment capacity or increasing EU support for member states to combat unemployment. The political forces from the PES family back enlargement and to that end champion a reform of the EU, with targeted treaty changes that empower the parliament and the commission. There is no specific mention, however, of granting the European Parliament the right to initiate legislation or of a total reform of the treaties, nor do they look to the CoFoE as a source of legitimacy.

The political parties gathered under the umbrella of Renew, as the liberal group in the European Parliament came to be known after the elections of 2019, have set out their position via the [manifesto](#) of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), the party to which most of the Renew forces belong. The liberals' manifesto includes the need to reform the EU in line with the conclusions of the CoFoE. They call for revisiting the treaties and transforming the European Commission into a true political leadership body, as well as the introduction of transnational voting lists.

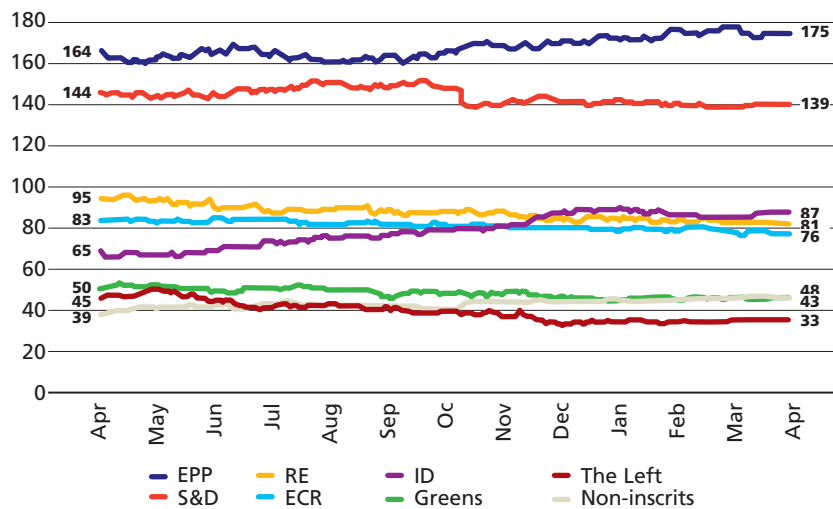
For its part, the European People's Party (EPP) presents itself as a "bridge" between those who consider themselves "global citizens without roots" and those who want to retreat into "national egoism". Its [manifesto](#) makes constant appeals to the EU motto of "United in diversity" to stake its claim to the role. The EPP says the parties to its left (Socialists, Greens and liberals) have lost sight of the big picture in the project of European construction at times; but it makes a distinction between them and the populist parties on the right, who it directly accuses of wanting to destroy Europe today. The EPP champions a strong and effective EU. But the conservatives do a balancing act when it comes to the dilemma of kicking on towards an ever closer union or restoring powers to the member states. They make no mention of the CoFoE but acknowledge that the EU must improve its institutions if it is to be capable of acting in a more efficient, strong and democratic manner. At the same time, they defend revising which powers could be transferred back to the member states, in a nod to the parties of the ECR. To that end, they propose a new European Convention to potentially improve the treaties.

In their [Prague Declaration](#) (2013), the European Conservatives and Reformists already championed the importance of the integrity of national sovereignty in the face of EU federalism and of putting an end to the waste and excessive bureaucracy of all things EU. A decade later, in the [Reykjavik Declaration](#) (2023), the parties of this radical right alliance said that the Europe they believe in is a union of "independent nations" that, though they cooperate, "retain their identity and integrity". In other words, they would rather the exercise of power lies with the states than with any supranational authority. Its [manifesto](#) for the elections builds on the same idea that state sovereignty must be safeguarded and there is no room for "unnecessary centralisation of power in Brussels". This means that cooperation in Europe is best when it takes place between sovereign states rather than in the framework of a supranational authority to which powers have been delegated.

The European People's Party (EPP) is performing a balancing act by courting the European Conservatives and Reformists but in turn rejecting the forces it describes as "Putin's friends", in the words of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen.

The new European Parliament will be more belligerent over the transfer of powers. European integration could therefore experience a sudden slowdown and, potentially, grind to a halt altogether.

How did we get here? Tracking voting intentions for the European Parliament (total seats per political group from April 2023 to April 2024)



Source: Compiled by CIDOB based on data from POLITICO EU, "Poll of Polls". Figures updated on 18 March, 2024

Identity and Democracy dispensed with adopting a manifesto for the elections of June 2024. At the party's [meeting](#) in November last year, Marine Le Pen declared the EU is a recent, artificial and ideological creation compared to a Europe of nations that has existed for thousands of years. In the [Declaration of Antwerp](#) (2022), the closest thing to an electoral programme, the ID parties level the criticism that, since Brexit, there has been an acceleration of efforts within the EU to replace the member states with a unitary state. And they accuse the bloc of seizing every crisis to advance its plan of more integration. In view of this, ID is opposed to any future transfer of sovereignty, arguing that the only cooperation among nations they are ready to accept is that in which the peoples and member states retain their rights. And they call for the return of powers to the states.

The subject of which specific powers could be restored to the member states, and under what conditions, is unlikely to come under discussion during the election campaign. Instead, it is more probable that the parties in favour of continuing European integration – each with its own nuances – will accuse those who are not of wanting to torpedo the union by trying to subvert its purpose of supranational cooperation, as the Socialists, EPP, Left and Greens do. The parties on the radical right and national conservatives that make up the ECR and ID, meanwhile, will counter by declaring they are [patriots](#) and will level accusations of "cultural Marxism" and globalism, backed by a transatlantic "national conservative" front that appears to have made Budapest its new mecca ([The Economist](#), 2024).

Division or pragmatism to the right of the EPP?

Support, or lack thereof, for European integration forms a deep fault line between European parliamentary groups and parties. On the whole, the forces that sit on the ECR and ID benches are loath to continue relinquishing national sovereignty to a supranational entity that they believe wants to stifle states' individuality. Yet there are differences

between the two groups, as well as in the perception that the majority families in the European Parliament have of them. The EPP's relations with Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, in her role of pragmatic Atlanticist, [are testimony to that](#).

The EPP is performing a balancing act by courting the European Conservatives and Reformists but in turn rejecting the forces it describes as “[Putin's friends](#)”, in the words of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. The polls say the current head of the EU's executive branch could need the support of Meloni and the political family she leads to secure a second term. Perhaps that is why Von der Leyen visited Italy several times in the closing stages of her first term; she travelled to Tunisia in the company of Meloni (and Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte) to close a deal under the “Team Europe” formula that helped to stem the arrival of migrants on Italian shores, and she has adopted certain points of the Italian prime minister's discourse. Von der Leyen has “Melonised” ([de Benedetti, 2023](#)) and in turn [the ECR has also opted to move closer to the EPP](#) (Pascale and Griera, 2023) in a bid to gain more clout and forge alliances on a European level. It is a strategy that the EPP leader, Manfred Webber, already espoused ahead of the Italian elections in 2022 (Sánchez Margalef, 2022). The ECR parties have dropped the idea of leaving the EU because they reap substantial rewards from belonging to the union, such as funds. And they have bolstered their narrative of reliable partners in votes on foreign and security policy matters in the European Parliament ([Becker and Von Ondarza, 2024](#)) on particularly sensitive issues in the current context, like the war in Ukraine.

Meanwhile, according to Becker and Von Ondarza (2024), the “Putin's friends” that Von der Leyen alluded to would be the parties that make up ID. These political forces too have dialled down their inclination to exit the EU, partly out of electoral interests, but they still display varying degrees of Eurosceptic vehemence in their rhetoric. While National Rally, Marine Le Pen's party, specifically omitted the option of leaving the EU in its domestic electoral programme in 2022 because it could have cost it votes ([Wright, 2022](#)), Alternative for Germany has been more explicit in pursuing the Brexit model ([Chazan, 2024](#)) without seeing its short-term chances of wielding influence harmed in any way.

Will polarisation halt integration?

If the election results are as the polls are predicting, the new European Parliament will be more belligerent over the transfer of powers. European integration could therefore experience a sudden slowdown and, potentially, grind to a halt altogether. The European People's Party group will hold the key. If ECR and ID gain greater sway over EPP decision-making, the Christian Democrats will be obliged to take a stand on whether they remain a force for an ever closer union or they act as a blocking minority on certain issues with the groups to their right.

There are two effects worth noting as we head into a new political cycle. First, this scenario in the European Parliament does not bode well for major steps towards greater European integration. And only in the event of an external crisis could the urgency of the situation act as a catalyst for further transfer of new powers to the EU, such as on issues of defence and taxation, for example.

Second, polarisation in the European Parliament is set to increase and this will likely lead to greater politicisation of European affairs and push the parties to be more confrontational in setting out their vision for the EU. If the central bloc (EPP, PES and liberals) disappeared, or was clearly weakened, we could also see an alternative political bloc scenario emerge on the left (PES, Greens and Left) and right (EPP, ECR and ID), with the liberals holding the balance of power. That could lead to new political dynamics both inside the parliament and in interinstitutional disputes.

Still, European integration is not decided in the Parliament alone. The Council of the EU remains largely dominated by parties from the central bloc. Even if representatives of ID took office as heads of state or government in the future, consensus will remain the norm rather than the exception. What changes is the capacity to undermine the institutions and the European project.

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WILL THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS HAVE AN IMPACT ON THE EU'S ENLARGEMENT AGENDA?

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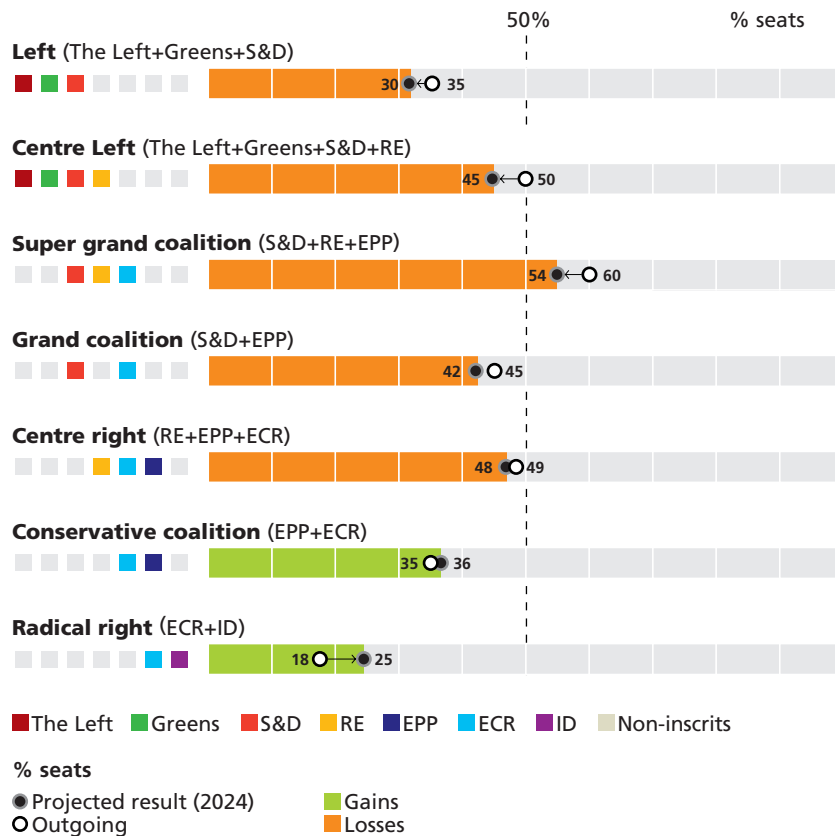
Polls predict that the next European Parliament (EP) will shift towards the right of the political spectrum after the elections. While the traditional European political centre is expected to hold, this new reality will likely have an impact on EU policymaking. Since this vote is taking place in an era of geopolitical shifts, one of the key questions will be the foreign policy implications of the elections, including the EU's enlargement agenda.

According to the latest polls, more than 25% of the members of the next European Parliament will sit further to the right of the centre-right European People's Party (EPP). The two parties on that side of the political spectrum, Identity and Democracy (ID) and the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), could also become the **fourth and fifth largest groups**, respectively. The balance of power between the ECR and the ID groups will hinge significantly on whether Victor Orbán's *Fidesz* chooses to align with one of the groups or remain non-attached.

The pro-European "super grand coalition", consisting of the conservative EPP, the social democrat S&D and the liberal Renew groups (plus the Greens/EFA, sometimes), will still have sufficient seats. Majorities could still be found without the support of the radical right parties, but things will be tighter as this **coalition is projected to lose seats** and only hold slightly over 50%. Indeed, the bigger the presence of ID and the ECR, the less space there will be for the centrist parties to build majorities.

The EPP will also be tempted to look to its right to seek partners on issues close to its conservative agenda, such as economic and monetary affairs, as well as the internal market or migration. For the first time, the possibility is emerging of a right-wing coalition, comprising the EPP, ECR and ID, and potentially supplemented by non-attached MEPs, predominantly from the radical right. All this will place the EPP in a powerful agenda-setting position and move the EP further to the right. Before exploring the possible impact of the extreme right, it is essential to understand the role the EP plays in the EU's external relations.

Possible coalitions among political groups in the European Parliament and change in relation to outgoing parliament (predicted results)



Note: The percentage takes into account the change in the number of seats, which in the new parliament of 2024 increase from 705 to 720 in total.
 Source: Compiled by CIDOB. Calculations based on projected data in Cunningham et al. "A sharp right turn: A forecast for the 2024 European Parliament elections", ECFR, January 2024

The EP's role in EU foreign, security and enlargement policies

In the EU's institutional set-up, member states have the competence when it comes to foreign and security policy, but this does not leave the EP powerless. The EP possesses three key competences, all of which extend to enlargement policy.

First, the EP possesses supervisory and deliberative powers. This competence is vital, as it influences the discourse on foreign policy. A noticeable shift towards the right within the European Parliament could lead to changes in foreign policy debates and recommendations aligned with the positions and priorities of radical right political parties, including on enlargement.

Secondly, the EP plays a significant role in the law-making and law-shaping process in the external action domain when it comes to the negotiation and ratification of international agreements. [The parliament's consent is required for any new accession to the EU.](#)

Lastly, the European Parliament has budgetary powers. Through them, the parliament holds significant influence over the financial aspects of accession, allowing the institution to directly shape the allocations for the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance and other types of resources assigned to candidate countries, starting with Ukraine. This gives the EP a final say in the budget debate, which is core in terms of defining foreign policy priorities and implementing them.

Any potential shift towards the right in the EP elections would impact the future of European legislation, the EU budget, and, more specifically, the EU's enlargement policy moving forward.

How does the radical right deal with enlargement?

Radical right parties in Europe share a [strong ethnonationalist orientation](#). They often insist on the primacy of national sovereignty over EU laws and EU foreign policy. Some of them are also sceptical of regional and global institutions and norms. There are certainly different levels of radicalism in radical right parties in their opposition to the European project, and national narratives and interests among radical right parties are often discordant.

Until now, radical right fragmentation in the European Parliament and the united stance of the mainstream parties on external affairs have reduced the overall impact of the extreme right on EU's foreign policy. The divisions have also hampered radical right parties' ability to present a unified stance on key policy areas, including enlargement. Yet, while these parties have had a modest impact on the decisions, they shine when framing EU foreign policy debates. The polarisation and securitisation of EU foreign policy is a common feature of the radical right .

Radical right parties often [oppose further EU enlargement](#). The main exception to this is when the inclusion of a specific new member favours particular national interests. The overall radical right perception of further EU enlargement is that it is too costly in terms of national sovereignty concessions and economic efforts and that it will lead to "undesired" migration flows. However, radical right parties also vary in their hostility towards further EU expansion.

Some European radical right parties oppose EU enlargement because of [socio-economic considerations](#). The Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), for instance, argues that enlarging the EU could jeopardise the EU's political and economic stability. New EU member states would draw considerable funds from the EU budget while making only small contributions to it given the size of their economies. Moreover, the FPÖ rejects using the EU budget to finance further enlargement as it sees that this approach would erode member states' sovereignty.

France's *Rassemblement National* (National Rally; RN) also cites socio-economic reasons for its opposition to enlargement. It argues that this process would bring a large increase in immigrants, who would compromise the security, well-being and job opportunities of French citizens. Likewise, the Sweden Democrats (SD) question the EU's ability to integrate more members and the new members' capacity to protect their borders from cross-border organised crime.

A noticeable shift towards the right within the European Parliament could lead to changes in foreign policy debates and recommendations aligned with the positions and priorities of radical right political parties, including on enlargement.

The overall radical right perception of further EU enlargement is that it is too costly in terms of national sovereignty concessions and economic efforts and that it will lead to “undesired” migration flows. However, radical right parties also vary in their hostility towards further EU expansion.

The second major rationale against further EU enlargement among European radical right parties is closely related to their focus on domestic policies. They claim that an enlarged EU will **threaten member states’ sovereignty**. This is the case for the French RN, which rejects enlargement on the grounds that it is contrary to the will of the European people and that it jeopardises member states’ interests. The Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV) and Germany’s *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany; AfD), both Eurosceptic parties, go even further and claim that EU policies pose a threat to their respective domestic affairs. Enlargement for them is no different.

A third approach against further EU enlargement can be found in Finland’s *Perussuomalaiset* (the Finns Party). Their opposition to expanding the EU springs from their perception that this **process is not consistent with the reasoning behind it**. EU enlargement is now seen as a geopolitical response to the imperatives of the current security landscape. The Finns Party argues that the EU is not a relevant geopolitical actor and that the union is incapable of providing security to their country, and that, therefore, enlargement is not a geopolitical answer to security challenges.

Nonetheless, not all radical right parties oppose further EU enlargement so firmly. For instance, while the Polish party *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (Law and Justice; PiS) highlights the importance of maintaining Poland’s sovereignty, it also supports enlargement and EU-aided democratic reforms in the EU’s neighbouring countries. PiS endorses the transformative power of EU enlargement and its contribution to the stability, prosperity and security of the continent.

Then, there is also a transactional and opportunistic approach to EU enlargement among European radical right parties. Some will support enlargement if they see that political benefits can be extracted from it. This is the case of the Romanian party *Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor* (Alliance for the Union of Romanians; AUR). It supports the integration of neighbouring countries in exchange for an EU reform that increases member states’ sovereignty.

It is also the case of the Hungarian party, *Fidesz*. Hungary has traditionally been a supporter of enlargement, particularly to the Western Balkan countries, where Hungary has significant political and economic interests. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has close connections with illiberal leaders in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Hungary’s endeavours to extend its influence in the Western Balkans have served to advance Orbán’s political and economic agenda. This rapprochement has proven to be detrimental to the democratic centrality of the enlargement process and, therefore, to the EU’s enlargement strategy.

How will the results of the elections impact EU enlargement policy?

While the EP is arguably not the most decisive institution when it comes to EU foreign policy and enlargement, it still has powers that might have an impact. An increase in radical right representation could complicate the parliamentary approval process for accession treaties, enhanced

financial assistance for enlargement-related reforms and the importance given to the rule of law within and outside the EU.

A rightward shift in the EP is likely to frame the necessary debate on EU enlargement in polarising and securitised terms. In doing so, radical right parties will try to shape the enlargement debate according to their own perspectives while disregarding the intrinsic transformative power of the EU's enlargement policy. Moreover, centrist parties might be tempted to adopt more extreme positions, regarding enlargement too, due to growing electoral competition with the radical right. The consequences of this shift may hamper the EP's ability to form coalitions to move forward.

Furthermore, increased representation of the radical right in the EP will potentially undermine the EU's cohesion and [credibility as a liberal democratic project](#). This would therefore reduce the possibilities of enlargement being a transformative tool, as candidate countries may not find the core values that made them seek EU membership in the first place.

Last but not least, although the European Council is the key institution for EU enlargement, the EP elections will provide a first glimpse of the challenges that the European Council may face in the near future. If this current political trend is not reversed, increased representation for the radical right in the European Council (determined by national elections) will pose even deeper challenges to the enlargement policy moving forward.

Radical right parties can be expected to deploy a transactional approach to further EU enlargement through national vetoes. Blocking consensus-building on enlargement in the European Council may become more frequent when national interests kick in and some sort of political or economic benefit can be obtained. This will diminish the EU's potential to move forward with further enlargements.

In conclusion, the prospective shift to the right side of the political spectrum in the upcoming EP elections could impact the future of EU enlargement policy. While the mainstream "super grand coalition" is forecast to hold, the coalition's solidity is expected to diminish.

Even if radical right parties in the EP do not have a unified approach to EU foreign policy, they have generally opposed EU enlargement for three main reasons: the socio-economic costs of enlargement and the division of its burdens within the EU; the interpretation that enlargement is a threat to national sovereignty; and the perception that adding new members to the EU does not fulfil enlargement's purpose of enhancing peace, prosperity and security on the European continent.

Worryingly, an increased presence of the radical right in the EP could contribute to eroding the EU's cohesion and credibility as a liberal democratic entity on the continent and around the world. Furthermore, the upcoming EP elections will offer insights into the potential challenges awaiting the European Council. At the end of the day, the European Union's overall political landscape will be reflected in different institutions and impact policy-making.

An increase in radical right representation could complicate the parliamentary approval process for accession treaties, enhanced financial assistance for enlargement-related reforms and the importance given to the rule of law within and outside the EU.

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Immigration is one of the hot button issues of the upcoming European elections. In fact, according to Krastev and Leonard (2024) migration is one of five “existential crises” that currently trouble European voters, along with the crises of the economy, climate, health and security. The authors say these fears, more than the left-right ideological divide, will determine the outcome of June’s vote.

What is striking about the immigration issue compared to the other crises is how it looms so large in the political debate, to the extent that in several national contexts the European elections have come to be considered a referendum on immigration. In France, Jordan Bardella, right-hand man to Marine Le Pen and head of the National Rally ticket, was unequivocal at the launch of his party’s election campaign: “It is quite clear [these elections] are a referendum against being inundated with migrants” (Bassets, 2024).

The power of anti-immigration discourse

Reflecting on the importance of the migration issue in the political debate also leads one to consider what lies behind a political discourse that is fundamentally hostile towards immigration. The question is even more intriguing if we consider the electoral weight the migration issue carries, which is significant, but still relative and less important than the other crises, according to Krastev and Leonard’s research. It is more baffling still if we bear in mind the contribution immigrants make to European society and the member states, for example in terms of demography (helping to offset an ageing population), economics (satisfying demand in specific sectors of the market) and welfare (via net fiscal contributions) (Kancs and Lecca, 2017 and OECD, 2022).

If we accept that the migration debate is fundamental to understanding the European political context, we need to ask two questions. Why is immigration so decisive in the political debate? And why do people speak so much and so negatively about immigration?

What is striking about the immigration issue compared to the other crises is how it looms so large in the political debate, to the extent that in several national contexts the European elections have come to be considered a referendum on immigration.

There are several reasons. Exploring them prompts profound reflection that transcends the current electoral climate and raises questions about the future of the European Union (EU).

The first reason relates to the rise of right-wing and radical right-wing populism, which has made the fight against immigration its main propaganda and electoral hobbyhorse. In a nutshell, there is so much talk about immigration (and so much of it is negative) because it has increased the political and institutional clout of those who chose this discourse. This trend is playing out in the European political arena via the growth of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and Identity and Democracy (ID) parties and their groups in the European Parliament. These parties and parliamentary groups share the same anti-immigration discourse, which rests on the fear of a vanishing national identity and is forged in the logic of us against them. According to the latest polls (Cunningham et al. 2024, Garsha, 2023), ECR and ID together could win 23% of the vote and become the second biggest political force in the chamber. ID's gains would come from the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, which continues to grow in the wake of its victory in the national elections, and S.O.S. Romania, which could win two seats. This would make it the third biggest parliamentary group. If, moreover, Fidesz in Hungary finally decides to join the ECR (whose president is Italy's Giorgia Meloni), its group in the European Parliament could secure a further 18 seats. Parties on the radical right are currently leading the polls in countries like Austria, Italy, France and Poland, and impressive results are expected in Germany, Portugal, Spain and Sweden.

The second reason, which is closely related to the first, concerns the attention that someone who speaks (so much and so negatively) about immigration captures. And it is connected to the twisted relationship between politics and the media. Ruth Wodak, one of academia's most respected voices regarding the political discourse on immigration, provides a clear explanation in her book *The Politics of Fear*. In an era of "media democracy" – where words trump facts and the political process of democracy is increasingly subject to individual, media-savvy performance – anti-immigration rhetoric triumphs in media outlets thanks to a perverse process. Confronted with a political representative's racist or xenophobic remark, the media cannot win. If, on the one hand, they choose not to report it, it might be perceived as censorship; if they do choose to report it, meanwhile, they inevitably end up helping to further its dissemination. This allows radical right populist parties to set the agenda and distract the media and the public from other important issues (Wodak, 2015).

The third reason is rooted in a feature of Western democracies in the 21st century, which connects the rise of parties on the radical right with the politics of identity. Gennaioli and Tabellini (2023) explain this very well in a recent article focusing on the United States. They show how a switch in the electorate's social identity, from class to culture, accounts for: one, growing conflict over identity issues among voters and parties and, two, a simultaneous attenuation of political conflict over matters of equality (despite rising inequality). In short, voters at the ballot box attach increasing importance to identity and cultural issues compared to those relating to economics and class. This change in voter demand

has been reflected in party political supply in terms of programmes and propaganda. It is in the shift from the politics of redistribution of the 20th century to the politics of recognition in the 21st century – in the words of Nancy Fraser (1997) – that anti-immigration rhetoric is bolstered as a central and *necessary* component of the political contest. The near synchronous rise of Donald Trump in the United States, Brexit in the United Kingdom, Marine Le Pen in France and Matteo Salvini in Italy is a clear illustration of the extent of the process, and its structural nature.

The final reason concerns the absence of political scope for an alternative discourse on immigration and is linked both to the dynamics of the traditional left-right axis and to relations between the old mainstream parties and the new populist parties on the radical right. Gennaioli and Tabellini, again, explain the first aspect in their study. Another consequence of the shift in voters' social identity, from class to culture, is a realignment of lower-class voters from the left to the right. On the one hand, this new identity-based and nativist electoral demand is an incentive for right-wing parties to push anti-immigration rhetoric to lure the lower classes; on the other, inevitably, it is a disincentive for left-wing parties to promote an alternative discourse and risk losing ascendancy over that same electorate. In short, if a clash of civilisations replaces the class struggle, left-wing parties will find it hard to come forward with alternative discourses and policies on the migration issue.

Lastly, the parties on the radical right have a “pull effect” on the mainstream parties (particularly those that sit between the centre and centre-right), drawing them to similar positions on migration issues. Kyung Joon (2015) details this dynamic, analysing the evolution of the main political programmes in 16 European countries over three decades spanning the 20th and 21st centuries. Yet one only need look at recent statements by European People's Party exponents. “Our national identity is open but not for sale,” they said in early March, auguring a restrictive shift on migration with a view to staunching the leakage of votes to parties on the radical right (Sahuquillo, 2024). Whether it is from the left or from the centre-right, the path to an alternative discourse on immigration is a blind alley.

Voters at the ballot box attach increasing importance to identity and cultural issues compared to those relating to economics and class.

The consequences of the election result

After the upcoming elections, populist voices on the radical right will be heard louder than at any time since the first direct elections to the European Parliament in 1979 (Cunningham et al., 2024). The polls would appear to leave no room for doubt. The rise of the right, reflected in the upsurge of ID and ECR, will come at the expense of the rest of parties, which to a greater or lesser degree will all see their parliamentary representation diminish. The shift to the right of the parliament's ideological centre of gravity augurs the entrenchment and institutionalisation of the anti-immigration discourse.

The repercussions of this election result, however, will be felt not only in terms of discourse, but also in concrete policies. On immigration, it will be crucial to see how the parliamentary makeup impacts the area of civil liberties, justice and internal affairs, where the limited centre-left majorities of today could be supplanted tomorrow by a populist right-

So far, the progression of European migration governance has been a slow but unremitting shift towards the “fortress Europe” project.

wing majority comprising the EPP, ECR and ID. This change could have major repercussions for European migration governance, particularly as far as the safety of migrants and the protection of their fundamental rights such as the right to asylum are concerned.

So far, the progression of European migration governance has been a slow but unremitting shift towards the “fortress Europe” project. Over the course of this journey, European borders have become more inaccessible, migration routes more dangerous, and the security of European citizens has been pursued – ever more blatantly – at the expense of the rights and lives of migrants. The radical right has had a clear impact on this process, framing the political and policy agenda on migration matters in terms of an exclusionary clash between us (Europeans) and them (migrants). To a large extent, however, it has been an indirect impact, exerted from a growing power in the national parliaments.

As of June 9th, should the election forecasts prove correct, this impact could also be direct, that is to say, exerted directly from the parliament and the other European institutions. This will probably mean an even more restrictive shift in migration and asylum policies, for example with the outsourcing of international protection procedures to third countries (as in the recent agreement between Italy and Albania) and the complete abandonment of alternative solutions, such as new channels of authorised entry to the EU. In short, it will be another step nearer “fortress Europe” and a step further away from the Europe of rights.

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Few issues cause more debate and polarisation in the European Union (EU) than climate and environmental policy. And it will be contentious during the campaign leading up to the European elections in June 2024, too.

First, it must be said climate change is already here, and its impacts are becoming increasingly apparent. By way of example, in the summer of 2023 alone heatwaves claimed the lives of 60,000 people in the EU (Ballester, 2023). There is, therefore, a growing awareness of climate risks and of the lack of preparedness for what lies ahead. In its first detailed climate risk assessment, the European Environment Agency (EEA) issues an explicit warning about the pace of increasing extreme weather phenomena that could soon have “catastrophic” consequences for Europe (2024). What’s more, other major environmental challenges apart from climate change are also impacting the continent, including biodiversity loss and chemical pollution (Richardson et al., 2023).

Second, while there is a relative consensus in the European political field on the scale of the climate and environmental challenge, there is no such consensus, however, on the depth of the reforms required to tackle it. Some sectors on the left question whether the green transition is truly just, disputing whether the European Commission’s current instruments and proposals, like the Just Transition Mechanism, really suffice to ensure that “no one is left behind” (Culot and Wiese, 2023). At the other end of the political spectrum, in each member state there are political forces (on the radical right and centre-right) who argue that “climate ideology” has gone too far and that the economic costs are unacceptable. In this regard, the greatest challenge has come from the European People’s Party (EPP). The political family of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has recently called for a “moratorium” on European climate legislation, probably in a bid to prevent a leakage of votes to the radical right.

The greatest challenge has come from the European People's Party. The political family of President Ursula von der Leyen has recently called for a "moratorium" on European climate legislation, probably in a bid to prevent a leakage of votes to the radical right.

Third, on an international level the relative optimism that followed the signing of the Paris Agreement of 2015 has given way to an era marked by uncertainty and lack of leadership. Nearly a decade on from Paris, global emissions are still rising and all but a few countries are honouring their commitments. In addition, oil producing countries and oil extraction companies have a growing influence over the design of climate policies, as we could see at the recent COP28, held in Dubai. And then there is the possibility of a change of direction on environmental matters in the United States, given the very real prospect of a second Trump administration. In such a scenario, the EU, with all its indecision and contradictions, would become practically the last bastion -among key countries and blocks- of climate policy on a global scale.

That is why the climate and environmental issue is crucial in the context of the European elections. At stake in these elections is where to place the emphasis of climate policies – on security, competitiveness, sustainability or cohesion – to ensure an "open strategic autonomy" that encapsulates the EU's position in an increasingly uncertain world (Kroll, 2024).

Taking stock of climate affairs in the ninth legislative term: from consensus to polarisation

After five years characterised by a certain consensus, climate change is emerging as one of the most politicised issues on the current agenda. In 2019, the fight against climate change was at the heart of the European political agenda. Shortly after her election as president of the commission, Ursula von der Leyen launched what would be her flagship policy: the European Green Deal.

This plan set the ambitious target of making the EU the first climate neutral economy by 2050 via far-reaching reform of key sectors such as energy, mobility and industry. More specifically, the European Climate Law launched in 2020 sets the target of achieving carbon neutrality by 2050 and establishes a framework for raising climate goals in the short and medium term. The policy, moreover, was bolstered as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, since a large part of the Next Generation EU funds were granted with the aim of decarbonising the European economies in mind.

But over the last two years of the term, the consensus forged by the main European political parties has gradually crumbled, for several reasons. For one thing, the conflict in Ukraine has upended the European energy market. Russia's war of aggression has laid bare the delicate state of affairs underpinning Europe's energy transition, largely resting on the supply of Russian natural gas, which the bloc considered a "transition fuel". As a result, the war has triggered an energy price shock not seen since the 1970s, raising the cost of a broad basket of goods and services, particularly electricity and food (OECD, 2022). For another thing, the transition from pledges to reach climate neutrality in 2050 to taking real measures has, unsurprisingly, sparked a reaction from the sectors that bear the brunt of green policies.

Pushback against these policies proliferated throughout 2023, a phenomenon that media outlets in the UK dubbed “greenlash” (Tocci, 2023). Popular support for these commitments appears to be shrinking. While nearly nine out of ten Europeans back the EU’s core goal of reducing carbon emissions to zero by 2050, that support has diminished compared to 2019 in 19 of the 27 EU countries. Finland, Estonia and the Czech Republic have reported falls in support of up to 15 percentage points (European Commission, 2023).

This reaction has been apparent at public policy level, too. The green agenda has suffered several setbacks, both nationally and on a European level. A prime example are the farmers’ protests that swept the continent in early 2024, particularly in countries with a significant agricultural base, such as France, Spain, Germany and the Netherlands. Although this sector will likely bear the brunt of climate impacts, as seen recently with the drought blighting southern Europe, many of the groups protesting are taking aim at European climate and environmental policies. Precisely on account of the demonstrations, a recent example of this “greenlash” is the scrapping of a 30% reduction target in agricultural emissions by 2040, as well as the withdrawal of a proposal to lower the use of pesticides.

Outlook for the new political cycle: a tenth term shifting to the right

Given the prospect of a change in the environmental agenda in the European Parliament, the outgoing EU institutions are hurriedly trying to tie up the loose ends of pending climate and environmental initiatives. Indeed, if the forecasts prove correct, the next political cycle will see a more conservative, more Eurosceptic European Parliament that is less inclined to implement ambitious climate and environmental policies.

The polls are indicating a swing to the right in many countries, with radical right populists gaining votes and seats across the EU, at the expense of the parties on the centre-left and greens¹. There is every indication that during the campaign populist Eurosceptic parties will continue to lead the polls in key member states like France, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands and Poland. According to the main forecasts, nearly half of the seats will go to MEPs outside the “grand coalition” of the three centrist groups (EPP, Socialists and Liberals). Inside the European Parliament, a right-wing coalition formed by the EPP, European Conservatives and Reformists and MEPs from the radical right Identity and Democracy party could win a majority for the first time.

This swing to the right will likely have significant implications for green policies on a European scale. In fact, in the current parliament a centre-left coalition of S&D (Socialists), Renew Europe (Liberals), Greens and the Confederal Groups of the Left have often prevailed on matters of environmental policy, but many of the votes were won by very slim margins. A significant swing to the right in the new parliament will quite possibly result in control for a coalition contrary to climate policy, particularly if the EPP chooses to enter into an alliance with the radical right rather than aligning with the Socialists, Greens and Liberals.

The “greenlash” is gaining traction in European politics. Paradoxically, at a time when the impacts of climate change are growing ever more severe, the Green Deal intended to confront the problem is increasingly under question by the public and various European political groups.

1. Regarding polls, the following sources were consulted for this paper: [EU Election Projection 2024](#), [Politico EU Elections](#), [Euronews Poll Average](#).

To avoid alienating disadvantaged groups and stoking the backlash, the next commission and parliament should develop instruments that channel the benefits of the green transition into the whole of society and share out the costs more equitably.

A turbulent climate future in political and environmental terms

The “greenlash” is gaining traction in European politics. Paradoxically, at a time when the impacts of climate change are growing ever more severe, the Green Deal intended to confront the problem is increasingly under question by the public and various European political groups.

It is essential not to lose sight of the magnitude of the climate challenge. Cutting emissions means reducing dependence on fossil fuels, the veritable mainstay of our economies, which requires profound economic and social change (Smil, 2019). Yet in communicating this challenge to the public, it is often omitted that this energy transition - based on renewables and which never questions levels of consumption - has major social and environmental consequences inside and outside the EU. This, among other reasons, is because renewable energy harvesting systems require a great deal of land and producing them is often water-intensive and highly polluting, particularly the process of acquiring the necessary raw materials (Zografos and Robbins, 2020). Another critical matter is that in no way will they alone be able to cover the current levels of energy consumption of the countries of the Global North (Smil, 2019). A true transition that means to be effective and just should therefore begin by significantly reducing energy and materials consumption, an issue that no relevant actor on the European political spectrum has really wished to broach so far.

Similarly, inside the EU this transition has undeniable negative impacts on already aggrieved groups, as highlighted by the virulent backlash among sectors shouldering a disproportionate burden of the reforms, from the yellow vests movement in 2018 to the farmers at present. Consequently, in order to avoid alienating disadvantaged groups and stoking the backlash, the next commission and parliament should develop instruments that channel the benefits of the green transition into the whole of society and share out the costs more equitably.

Yet, despite the tragic reality that without green policies the whole of society stands to lose, there is every indication that the European political winds will blow in a different direction, pushing the continent and the planet further away from the goal of achieving the swiftest, fairest and most inclusive transition possible.

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The runup to the European election campaign began with [claims](#) of Russian interference in the vote. Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo said that Russia had approached members of the European Parliament and “had paid them to promote propaganda” on behalf of the Kremlin. And the Czech government sanctioned a news site called Voice of Europe, which according to Prague was part of pro-Russian influence operation. In November 2023, a study requested by the [Authority for European Political Parties and European Political Foundations](#) to look into possible foreign interference that might impact democratic processes in the European Union (EU) had already warned that the election to the European Parliament, consisting of 27 individual elections across the continent, “is particularly susceptible to external interference due to its complexity” and the potential for a single “successful attack in one country to cast doubt on the entire process”. Given these circumstances, the European Commission announced the Defence of Democracy package of measures in December. Still under discussion, it includes a controversial [legislative proposal for a register of representatives of foreign interests](#), according to which all organisations receiving foreign funding that carry out interest activities would have to be entered on an EU-wide transparency register.

All this reveals the level of geopolitical confrontation enveloping elections that are crucial for the future of the union. The ballot box has emerged as the clearest test of the vulnerabilities troubling European democratic systems, from the erosion of confidence in the institutions to the polarisation of debates and sympathies; from the technological capability to distort the truth to the impact of responses to disinformation as a social problem. It is ultimately a vulnerability made of many factors and a challenge that requires a sophisticated and multilevel response.

Prior weaknesses, online and offline

What was propaganda in the past, and now labelled disinformation – with an unprecedented capacity for dissemination thanks to technology push and a combination of diverse tactics, techniques and procedures – has become a “growing systematic pressure” for the European Union

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(European Parliament, 2016). Disinformation is a geopolitical challenge and a social problem. It is an instrument of external interference but also of internal vulnerability.

That is why the European strategy to combat disinformation merges two different logics: (geo)political and media; the logic of security and the logic of social resilience. Disinformation aims to destabilise societies, directly attacking civilian spaces in order to foment polarisation and unrest, if not conflict (Freedman et al., 2021). But the spread of disinformation does not take place in a vacuum. Its capacity to enter the public debate, to confuse and undermine confidence in the institutions or electoral processes, for example, often draws on existing sociocultural divisions. It targets prior vulnerabilities and particular groups supposedly inclined to trust in certain sources or narratives who can contribute, voluntarily or not, to its dissemination.

We are mired in a content-saturated media space marked by an excessive distrust of traditional sources of information. The gradual loss of journalistic authority (Carlson, 2017) and the weakness of the media systems in a good many EU countries has added to this confusion.

For one thing, the concentration of media ownership as a threat to media pluralism has hit very high-risk levels throughout the continent, particularly in Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Romania and Slovenia¹. For another, digital platforms exist alongside and interact with many other online and offline disinformation vehicles. The rhetoric of certain political elites or the programming of certain traditional media outlets have a greater capacity to influence and disseminate false narratives than some of the social media or “pseudo-media” outlets in the crosshairs of the lawmakers. There is a twin dilemma here. Television and the narratives circulating among “trustworthy community members” are highly influential in shaping people’s beliefs and behaviours, while the growing number of digital platforms dilutes the effectiveness of any specific action that some of them might take to counter disinformation (Bateman and Jackson, 2024). Disinformation, then, is a social problem that far transcends the power of the digital giants and even the idea of foreign interference. Discourses online and offline feed off one another. And local media or individuals are among the greatest amplifiers of certain disinformation narratives.

European elections and regulatory acceleration

The elections to the European Parliament have served as a guiding thread in the EU’s regulatory response to disinformation. One only need look at how electoral contexts have coincided in recent years with the rollout of measures and regulations the EU has been testing in its particular approach to the fight against fake news.

The breakout moment, the realisation, came in 2014: disinformation and hybrid interference entered the European debate tentatively and at the request of the Baltic republics, who were concerned about the evolution of the conflict in Ukraine and its impact on public opinion in their countries. Disinformation was understood then merely as

1. Data from the [Media Pluralism Monitor](#), a research project of the European University Institute of Florence that assesses the health of media ecosystems in Europe.

an external threat from which some member states felt completely removed, resulting in a multispeed Europe in the face of disinformation, particularly from the point of view of legislation (Magallón, 2019).

But the complexity of the phenomenon soon produced a catalogue of political episodes – the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom and the US presidential elections of 2016, or during the election campaigns in France and Germany in 2017 – that made it necessary to take a longer view. It was a moment of diversification and acceleration. The High Level Expert Group released its report on fake news and online disinformation (2018), laying the first conceptual foundations of the phenomenon. A code of practice on disinformation was also approved, the first self-regulatory mechanism agreed between the European institutions and the big online platforms and social networks. The code saw the end of the large digital platforms' long-held defence that they were mere innocent intermediaries. Although from the point of view of responsibility for content, this strategy was interpreted as outsourcing the power to regulate online public discourse to private enterprise, with the political and social impact that brings (Colomina and Pérez-Soler, 2022).

By the time the 2019 European elections came around, the EU had laid the groundwork of its regulatory, geopolitical and conceptual strategy, and the platforms had begun to take measures. The European institutions improved the tools for protecting news and journalism with the launch of the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), which serves as a hub for fact checkers and academics to work together, while it encourages them to help improve media literacy. The COVID-19 pandemic escalated the impact of the phenomenon globally, and the need for coordination.

But the construction of this governance framework has taken a major leap forward ahead of the 2024 European elections with the approval of two significant legislative proposals. The first is the Digital Services Act (DSA), the primary tool and the first “strong” EU regulation, which came into effect in February. It marks a clear commitment to adopting mechanisms for the control, traceability and reporting of illicit activity or services that might be offered online and includes the power to impose penalties. The second is the [approval of the European regulation on artificial intelligence \(AI\)](#), which seeks to regulate the risks involved in the use of AI and imposes an ethical code of conduct backed by million-euro fines for companies that fail to comply. The EU, then, is the first jurisdiction to have specific legislation on the matter, although many questions remain unanswered.

But all this shows that as we head into the elections in June 2024 we find ourselves on new ground, with more tools but also with new fears, thanks to the rise of AI. There are some precedents. In the [elections in Slovakia](#), held on September 30th, 2023, and the parliamentary elections in Poland on October 15th the campaigns were shaken by the emergence of alleged (AI-generated) recordings seeking to create distrust in the integrity of the electoral processes.

The EU cybersecurity agency (ENISA) has warned of the possible risks posed to the European Parliament elections by AI chatbots and audio and video deepfakes and “cheap fakes” (a term coined by [Joan Donovan and](#)

The construction of this governance framework has taken a major leap forward with the approval of two significant legislative proposals. The first is the Digital Services Act (DSA), the primary tool and the first “strong” EU regulation. The second is the approval of the European regulation on artificial intelligence (AI Act).

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[Britt Paris](#) to describe basic video editing techniques to speed, slow, cut or recontextualise existing material to create hoaxes). In its [2023 report](#), ENISA said that the number of cases of disinformation and manipulation detected over the year had risen significantly compared to the previous 12 months, and content related to the Ukraine war was centre stage.

Disinformation, mobilisation and results

Disinformation contributes to polarisation. It constructs narratives suitably tailored to appeal to our emotions. There is a clear relationship between the social media driving political polarisation and the prevalence of disinformation, which in turn potentially undermines democratic quality (Tucker et al., 2018). Polarisation has gradually shaped (and increasingly so) democratic competition throughout Europe and the political landscape that emerges from the ballot boxes.

The logic of confrontation, the identification of “enemies”, be they tangible or symbolic, with which to establish a dynamic of opposition reinforces niches, stirs supporters and dominates the political and news agenda (Pira, 2019). This party polarisation has ambivalent consequences for democracies. While it is true that studies show it can have a mobilising effect on voters, they also indicate that this effect is driven by emotions (Ellger, 2023) and therefore they mobilise people negatively. By the same logic, exposure to disinformation can also help mobilise supporters and demobilise opponents. [Polarisation](#) spells the end of “permissive consensus” on central issues for the European construction.

Furthermore, the impact of disinformation on the public debate can have direct consequences for the political agenda, particularly on sensitive issues for public opinion such as climate commitments, military support for Ukraine or the reception of refugees (Marconi, 2023). And, from fear and [geopolitical anxiety](#), a more insular European Union may emerge.

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While Russia's aggression against Ukraine may have reconnected a part of the public with the European project, support for Eurosceptic parties has continued to grow, hitting critical levels in a good deal of European Union (EU) member states. Euroscepticism has a variable geography but can be heard loud and clear in certain more depressed areas, peripheries marked by a lack of opportunities, particularly rural settings. The urban-rural divide delineates to a large extent what some have called the geography of discontent in Europe (CoR, 2024). Understanding and addressing the root of this discontent may be crucial for the future of the EU after the upcoming elections in June.

The root of discontent in Europe

The disaffection existing in many European regions is attributable to several factors, ranging from cultural circumstances (proportion of older people, low levels of education, migratory imbalances) to economic aspects (rates of wealth and employment) and even geographical considerations (population density or the quality of public services available).

Economic growth in the EU is primarily concentrated in large urban centres. This is largely down to the economic benefits associated with agglomeration and density. In most EU countries there is a significant differential in terms of GDP per capita between large cities and systems of intermediate cities and rural zones. The former have more advanced infrastructure and greater capacity to attract investment, innovation and talent. And that is why they offer better opportunities and salaries. The latter, meanwhile, lead the rankings of stagnation and lack of economic progress.

The gap in prosperity between urban centres and rural zones is mirrored in people's confidence in the public sector, particularly in the European Union (Dominicis *et al.*, 2020). A major portion of the dissatisfaction with the European project is concentrated in regions blighted by prolonged decline; regions that have seen unemployment rise, the young

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and talented move away, public services become ever more substandard and often limited infrastructures decay. It is a discontent not only rooted in economics, but which is also fed by a sense of political and social marginalisation that is accentuated when these regions compare themselves to the most developed and affluent areas, which may lead to a disturbing regional polarisation.

Several indicators point to a rise in Euroscepticism in recent years. One of the clearest signs is the support for parties that take a more or less open stand against the European Union, be it against the project as a whole or one or other of the policies driven from Brussels in critical areas such as climate change or migration. Support for Eurosceptic parties has increased dramatically in the last 20 years, from 6.9% of the votes cast in national elections in 2003 to 28.5% in 2023 (Rodríguez-Pose *et al.*, 2023).

A detailed analysis of those figures reveals an urban-rural divide. In most EU countries the Eurosceptic vote is largely concentrated in rural and intermediate areas. This is true in countries where Eurosceptic parties have performed very well in subnational and national elections in recent years, such as Italy Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. And it is also true of countries with a tradition of Euro-enthusiasm, like Germany, where the vote for the burgeoning Alternative for Germany (AfD) is strongest in the less prosperous areas in the east of the country; or in the Netherlands, Portugal or Estonia, where the few regions in which the Eurosceptic vote was higher than 30% were predominantly rural. At the other extreme, large prosperous cities and capitals like those of the four countries that make up the Visegrad Group have frequently become spaces of resistance. The main exception is France, where the Eurosceptic vote cuts across the whole of society.

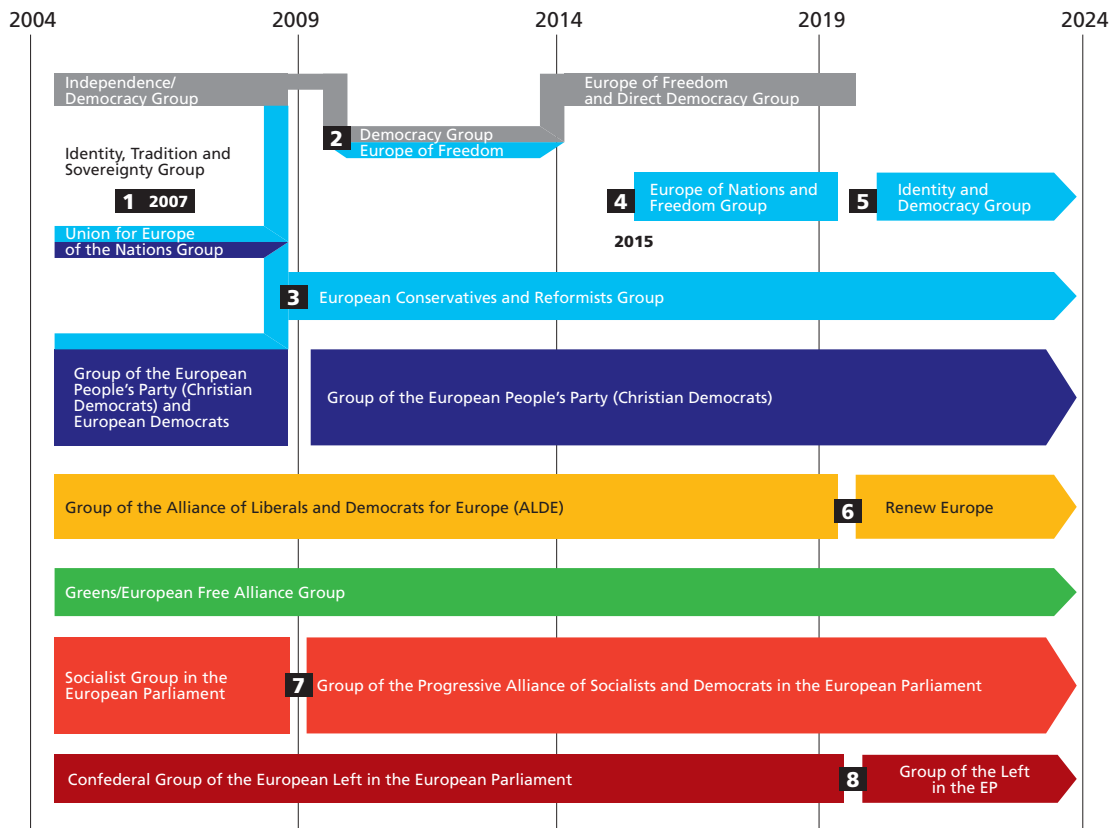
Given these circumstances, and ahead of elections to the European Parliament whose results could mark a milestone for Eurosceptic parties and have a considerable impact on the policies promoted by the EU, there is an urgent need to assess the possible responses to counter this discontent and advance the necessary cooperation between rural areas, intermediate territories and urban agglomerations.

Cohesion policy and other proposals to deal with the discontent

There is some consensus that one of the most effective means of combating the social discontent is to devise solid development strategies for those areas that are trailing behind (Rodríguez-Pose y Dijkstra, 2021). And this is precisely what the European institutions have been trying to do since the inception of the cohesion policy in the late 1980s, coinciding with the accession of Greece, Portugal and Spain to the EU. This is no small undertaking: for the period 2021-2027 it accounts for a third of the entire EU budget.

Given cohesion policy's potential, it follows that strengthening it as an instrument to address economic and industrial decline in middle-income regions could help to tackle the growing Euroscepticism. That is also the conclusion of a [report released recently by the European Commission](#), which highlights the need to offer specific and tailored proposals to the

Who wants to vote with me? How the political groups in the European Parliament have evolved over two decades (2004-2024).



1 *Identity, Tradition and Sovereignty.* A far-right group that formed in 2007 and fell apart in November of the same year following offensive remarks made by Alessandra Mussolini regarding its members from the Greater Romania Party.

2 *The Europe of Freedom and Democracy Group* was formed, a coalition of 11 parties chiefly composed of members of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and Italy's Lega. In June 2014, it lost nine of its members and re-formed under the name of Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy Group (EFDD).

3 *The European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR)* was founded. It is a Eurosceptic, anti-federalist, right-wing and, increasingly, far-right group, particularly since Brexit and the departure of the British Conservatives.

4 Following an initial unsuccessful attempt to form a stable far-right group after the elections of 2014, led by Marine Le Pen, Matteo Salvini and Geert Wilders, the *Europe of Nations and Freedom Group* finally came into being in June 2015, composed of the French National Front and the Austrian and Dutch far right, among others.

5 Ahead of the 2019 elections the Europe of Nations and Freedom Group was re-founded as the *Identity and Democracy Group (ID)*, with the participation of parties from ten member states, including Italy's Lega, the French National Front (FN, now National Rally; RN) and Alternative for Germany (AfD).

6 Building on the framework of the *Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)*, the liberal group re-formed as *Renew Europe* to come together with the candidates of French President Macron's Renaissance party.

7 The group officially changed its name to the *Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D)*.

8 The group officially changed its name to *The Left in the European Parliament - GUE/NGL*.

Source: Compiled by CIDOB.

Only four of the current European political families include direct or indirect references to cohesion policy or the regional dimension of European policies in their election manifestos.

inhabitants of smaller cities, town and villages and rural areas, especially in terms of guaranteeing the same public services as those enjoyed by the inhabitants of major cities.

It is surprising, then, that only four of the current European political families include direct or indirect references to cohesion policy or the regional dimension of European policies in their election manifestos. There are also significant differences between them in terms of the importance given to urban and rural development issues. They range from somewhat vague references to the need to “overcome economic and social disparities between Europe’s regions” (the Left) and to “prioritise investment in modernisation and convergence of under-served regions” (the Greens) to explicit mentions of the need to continue implementing cohesion policy (the Socialists), though without making a distinction in how it should be done differently in cities and rural areas.

The rather modest presence of cohesion policy and rural development issues in the leftist and centre-left parties’ manifestos contrasts with the importance the EPP gives them, devoting a whole section to the subject.¹ They speak of needing to “turn the brain drain into brain gain” and vow to work to ensure there are no “first and second-class citizens” via a cohesion policy that takes account of the interests of rural and urban areas equally. They are also the only ones to explicitly mention improving rural-urban synergies and closing existing gaps.

The European Popular Party even puts forward a specific plan for rural areas in its manifesto. This forms part of a long-term strategy to give weight to rural affairs and [present itself as the champion](#) of farmers and rural interests. According to the EPP, “rural areas are not the periphery, but the heart of Europe”. It is worth recalling that rural and peri-urban zones [occupy 80%](#) of the European Union’s total area, though they only account for 30% of its population.

The tensions between the agenda for Europe’s green transition and the interests of the inhabitants of rural areas also explain part of the current discontent. It is important to note here the effort that the left-wing parties are making in their manifestos to counter the narrative that the European Green Deal is anti-farmer. The Greens make it clear that the green transformation should go hand in hand with a strong social cohesion policy to “ensure all regions of Europe benefit”. In the same vein, according to the Socialists the “fight for the Green Deal is also a fight to improve the lives of farmers”. In their electoral programme they speak of the need to offer them financial and technical support to achieve the goals of the green transition.

The leftist parties’ climate commitment, however, contrasts with the more moderate positions (or open climate denial) of the European right. The EPP seeks to curb the ambition of the European Green Deal, particularly anything that might directly impact rural Europe. A first sign of that arose some months ago, when the party voiced its opposition to two fundamental proposals of the European Green Deal: [the regulation for a sustainable use of pesticides](#) and the [regulation for nature restoration](#). They argue that these regulations could threaten the EU’s food security in the long term, pursue overly ambitious goals and place an unreasonable burden on farmers just as they are struggling.

1. The European People’s Party is the only party on the right to put forward solutions to the problems of rural Europe in its political proposal, establishing a certain connection with urban Europe. The European Conservatives and Reformists group overlooks the issue in its programme and merely refers vaguely to the need to have “efficient and modern public services and sensitivity to the needs of both rural and urban communities”. The parties on the radical right that form the Identity and Democracy group, meanwhile, make no mention of the issue whatsoever in their manifesto.

In conclusion

The recent protests by farmers in several European capitals – Brussels included of course – provide a clear snapshot of this geography of discontent. The agricultural sector is unhappy with EU policies, particularly the bureaucracy coming out of the European institutions and the proscriptions that come with the climate commitment. And the feeling is compounded by the widening gap between more prosperous and dynamic urban zones and disadvantaged and stagnating rural areas. The sense of abandonment and anger goes a long way to explaining why in most European countries the vote for the various forms of Euroscepticism is concentrated in these latter areas.

Most experts agree that cohesion policy remains the best tool for addressing this discontent and the urban-rural divide behind it. Still, it is surprising how timidly the left-wing groups approach the issue and how little importance they attach to the urban agenda. Although this inattention can be explained by the fact that cities generally concentrate a good part of the progressive vote, it contrasts with the fact that the right does take cohesion policy into account as the main tool to promote territorial convergence and take care of rural areas, where they have the largest number of votes.

Rural discontent with climate policies appears to have drawn a section of the traditional right towards the climate denial bloc, or at least to those looking to rein in the EU's ambition of recent years. Bearing in mind that, according to Eurocities data, climate action is the first priority of the mayors of Europe's main cities, the new balances of power to arise out of the election in June may spell trouble for the urban agenda. Add to that the recentralising trends making inroads in Europe in recent years and the scenario appearing over the horizon looks bleak.

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The forthcoming European elections will have a decisive impact on the economic capacity of the European Union (EU) over the next decade. The result of the vote will determine the balance of power among the parties with representation in the European Parliament – the foundation on which the legislation that the European Commission proposes will rest. One of the commission's main priorities will be drafting the proposal for the new multiannual financial framework (MFF). The commission also plays a crucial role in overseeing economic governance and compliance with EU fiscal rules.

The EU's budget cycle (seven years) and political cycle (five years) do not coincide. This means that the next executive branch of the EU, whose term will cover the period 2024-2029, will be responsible for executing what remains of the current budget (MFF 2021-2027) and drawing up the following one (MFF 2028-2035). The next commission's work on the budget will begin immediately upon election in order to be ready to submit the multiannual financial framework package for interinstitutional debate in mid-2025. That debate usually lasts between a year and a half and two years, meaning the new regulatory framework should be accepted no later than mid-2027 so it is ready for implementation as of 2028.

The most important components of the MFF are the Regulation, which sets the EU's spending ceilings, and the Decision on own resources, which establishes the EU's sources of revenue. The regulation is approved unanimously by the Council of the European Union, while the European Parliament can approve or reject the council's position, but not modify it. The own resources decision requires the unanimous approval of the council, an opinion from the parliament and ratification by all the member states (in accordance with their constitutional requirements) before it can enter into force.

Budget challenges

Setting EU revenue and expenditure is a hugely important milestone, because once established it is politically very difficult to make substantive changes. Exceptionally, the budget was boosted by €64.6bn in the

The EU budget has remained at 1% of EU GDP since the end of the 1980s and clearly does not suffice to tackle emergencies and support the EU's new political priorities.

mid-term revision of the MFF 2021-2027, by an additional amount of nearly 9% over the 2024-2027 budget. A total of €10.6bn came from existing funding and the rest from member states' national budgets. Of this amount, €50bn went to the Ukraine Facility and the rest to other priorities such as strategic technologies and migration. Given the decision must be unanimous, agreement was only possible after overcoming Hungary's veto in an initial vote.

This lack of budget flexibility could be sidestepped during the pandemic, however, because COVID-19 struck in early 2020, just before the approval of the MFF for 2021-2027. That allowed for the creation of an extraordinary facility, the Next Generation EU (NGEU) funds, which expanded the EU budget by 66%. Still, the NGEU funds were approved because they were considered an exceptional circumstance¹, with the pledge there would be no repeat in the future. To make sure of that, and to preclude increasing contributions to the European budget from national funds during the crisis, the EU turned to issuing debt, repayment of which will begin in 2028 with the new MFF and run until 2058.

The EU budget has remained at 1% of EU GDP since the end of the 1980s and clearly does not suffice to tackle emergencies² and support the EU's new political priorities, prominent among which are the green transition, defence and industrial policy. According to Mario Draghi, a former president of the European Central Bank, the EU needs investment of €500bn a year to stay in the technological and digital race with the United States and China, a third of which should be public and ideally European funds to avert a subsidy war among the member states. In other words, according to Draghi the European institutions need to invest an amount equivalent to the EU's annual budget just to remain in the strategic contest among powers.

1. COVID-19 was considered an exogenous and unforeseen shock that had an uneven impact on the member states, which could not be accused of mismanagement. The creation of the NGEU facility did not mutualise pre-existing debt and the European funds were not considered to cause moral hazard (incentives for less fiscal responsibility).
2. The European budget's flexibility mechanisms amount to €21bn (2% of the MFF for 2021-2027). Additionally, the European Commission can only ask the member states for up to 0.3% of their gross national income (GNI) to tackle economic, geopolitical, health contingencies or unexpected events of any other nature. This amount is the difference between the maximum that in exceptional circumstances the member states can contribute to the MFF for 2021-2027 (2% of GNI), the expenditure commitments provided for in the budget (1.1% of GNI) and the 0.6% set aside to back the increase in EU debt because of the NGEU funds.

Regarding the financial assistance to Ukraine, the Ukrainian Ministry of Finance estimated that in 2024 alone the country needs around €34bn in external contributions to cover the bulk of the economy's deficit. That is equivalent to 20% of the European budget for this year, which reveals the enormous challenge facing the EU to back Ukraine collectively should the United States drastically reduce its financial support. The figure is close to the 0.25% of EU GDP that Estonia has proposed the European countries allocate to Ukraine. As well as finding funding for these two major priorities, the EU must also meet other challenges such as the repayment of the NGEU funds debt and the appropriation for its migration policy.

How to obtain more resources?

If the EU is serious about its commitments, it must put its money where its mouth is and provide financial resources for its latest priorities in the new MFF. Its main options are either boosting revenue by raising member states' contributions, making use of common debt or increasing the EU's own resources, since the EU cannot incur a deficit. Or it could cut expenditure elsewhere.

In Europe, country of origin determines political party preferences for the various options more than affiliation to a particular political group. Parties on the right of the political spectrum in the centre and north

of Europe are generally against increasing EU spending, while the same parties in the south of Europe are more inclined to boost the EU's financial capacity, as could be seen in the negotiations over the NGEU funds. The member states have more sway over budget matters than the European Parliament because their contributions are the chief source of EU budget funding, and they have the right of veto.

While it may be the preferred option for many governments, there is limited scope to reallocate expenditure. The biggest items in the European budget are the common agricultural policy (CAP) and the cohesion funds. The CAP has gone from accounting for over 60% of the MFF in the 1980s to [a little less than 30% at present](#). Judging from the recent protests by European farmers and the speed with which political parties of various persuasions agreed to make concessions, such as modifying the CAP³ or reintroducing import restrictions on Ukrainian agricultural products, agricultural policy as an adjustment mechanism appears to have little traction in future budget negotiations. The [European Parliament](#) and the [countries from the south and east of Europe](#), meanwhile, champion maintaining the cohesion funds (which account for another 30% of the current budget) as the primary tool for reducing the economic and social disparities between regions. What's more, a future EU enlargement to incorporate eight new countries with economic and social indicators well below the European average will bring major adjustments in the beneficiaries of the cohesion funds. And as the mid-term revision of the MFF for 2021-2027 showed, there is little wiggle room for adjustment in the rest of the items as a means of freeing up funds.

The main alternative would be for member states to increase their contributions to the EU, but they are reluctant, partly because of the fiscal challenge they face at home. The [fiscal rules](#) featured in the Security and Growth Pact start up again this year, pressuring governments to reduce spending and investments. And all this is set to take place against a backdrop of an ageing population eroding European tax frameworks (strongly geared to taxing labour) and a green and digital transition shrinking traditional tax bases (2023 Strategic Foresight Report). In addition, countries must accommodate greater spending in other areas like defence. Several governments, such as those of Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands or Austria, are adamant that, other than to help Ukraine financially, the new priorities must be funded by cutting spending elsewhere.

Another option would be common debt issuance, similar to the borrowing undertaken for the NGEU, as Estonia, France and Poland have proposed to cover military investments.⁴ But several countries, Germany especially, oppose increasing common debt. Its finance minister, Christian Lindner, who belongs to the Free Democratic Party (FDP), and the conservative CDU are particularly vocal opponents. It should be noted here that Germany has a [debt brake limiting budget deficits](#) to 0.35% of GDP enshrined in the constitution and that in late 2023 the German Constitutional Court ruled it was illegal to reallocate debt unused during the pandemic to the creation of a fund for climate action and modernising its industry. Germany, the biggest contributor to the EU coffers, will hardly adopt a looser financial position in Europe when its debt is restricted and it faces budgetary woes at home.

In the European Union, country of origin determines political party preferences for the various options more than affiliation to a particular political group.

3. The measures include dropping the requirement for farmers who receive CAP subsidies to set aside part of their land for biodiversity, minimise tillage and rotate crops between seasons to prevent the loss of nutrients.
4. Estonia has proposed the creation of a European fund of €100bn.

Lastly, there is the option of increasing the EU's own resources. This is a recurring debate among the European Commission, European Parliament and the member states. The first two advocate making the European budget more independent of the member states, while the member states are fearful of losing sources of revenue. In June 2023, the commission proposed expanding the current own revenue sources (from customs duties, a small share of VAT receipts and a levy on non-recycled plastic packaging waste) with the transfer to the EU budget of 30% of revenue generated from emissions trading (ETS), 75% of the revenue from the new Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) and 0.5% of the theoretical base of company profits in the EU. Given that changes in taxation require unanimity, the commission is making the case for introducing "rates" or "mechanisms" as sources of revenue.

While other sources of funding exist, their potential is limited. The [European Peace Facility](#), for example, which is funded outside the EU budget, has been expanded to €17bn to accommodate €11bn in military support for Ukraine and maintain the other ten military operations in which the EU is participating. But this facility accounts for just a small fraction of the [€143bn that the EU and the member states have allocated to helping Ukraine](#) in the last few years. This contribution would have been impossible without the direct collaboration of the member states, as it is equivalent to over 80% of the EU's annual budget. Given the scale of things, while the [possible agreement](#) to use €3bn from the interest generated from frozen Russian funds to arm Kyiv may be a necessary step, it is a drop in the ocean and, as the [European Central Bank](#) has said, there are important legal and monetary concerns over making use of the €191bn in frozen Russian assets. These funding difficulties have also raised the pressure on the European Investment Bank (EIB) to open up to funding security-related projects and help mobilise private capital in defence investment.

The solution? Move forward together or separately

In the absence of enhanced EU mechanisms, the differences between countries' fiscal capacities will be more evident and divergences between member states will increase. The EU will find it hard to measure up to its international commitments and geopolitical ambitions. There will be notable disparities in defence spending depending on a country's risk perception, and tensions between industrial policy and competition policy will increase, harming the single market and European competitiveness. A multi-speed EU driven by "coalitions of the willing or able" is not necessarily a negative thing, but an EU running at too many speeds runs the risk of stalling.

Ultimately, the EU faces the pressing need to increase its common budget and its own sources of funding in view of the limits to reallocating expenditure and the reluctance of the member states to raise their direct contributions or sanction the creation of a new common borrowing mechanism. The upcoming elections are important because without a favourable political climate that enables a shift from unanimity to a majority vote on budgetary issues, for example, it is hard to conceive of a reform of the budget (Buti, 2023) that is vital if the EU is to rise to the challenges before it.

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“**D**efence matters”. That was the slogan European political leaders used during the 2013 European Council on defence, the first meeting of its kind. Since then, EU security and defence has become a politically relevant issue for EU member states and concrete steps have been taken to ensure that the union delivers on defence. Since 2016, during a period marked by Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, the EU has created new tools such as the European Defence Fund (EDF) and the European Peace Facility (EPF). The EU has also published its first-ever security and defence strategy in the form of a “[Strategic Compass](#)” and a first [European Defence Industrial Strategy](#). These initiatives have emerged largely because of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, where the EU has also moved into gear, producing ammunition as well as supporting the Ukrainian economy with financial provisions. Yet, there is also great apprehension in Europe about the future course of American politics, with a risk that Europeans will be left alone to see to their own defence.

In one important sense, therefore, the geopolitical environment has fundamentally changed, and this is naturally felt by EU citizens, especially in an election period. In fact, the 2024 European elections will take place under the shadow of the Russian threat, questions about the transatlantic relationship and the rise of China. This election occurs in a rhetorically different environment too, with political leaders openly calling for a “war economy” or even the potential of having European troops deployed in Ukraine, as well as the constant Russian sabre-rattling with nuclear weapons. Indeed, in one of the last Eurobarometer polls on defence policy 80% called for more defence cooperation in the EU, and two-thirds of those polled agreed that the EU should increase defence spending and reinforce its defence production capacities.

Yet with increasing EU public investments in security and defence EU citizens will also want a greater say over how the union and its member states invest financial resources. Since 2021, when the EU began its last budgetary cycle, the union has invested approximately €30bn directly in defence for research and technology, capability development, armaments production, military mobility, train and equip programmes and more. EU citizens have been exposed to these investments via the media with

The 2024 European elections will take place under the shadow of the Russian threat, questions about the transatlantic relationship and the rise of China.

renewed intensity since Russia's war on Ukraine. Heading into the Europeans elections, there will be a far greater focus on EU security and defence, even if past elections have also focused on this issue. For example, when he ran for European Commission president under the then *Spitzenkandidat* process, Jean-Claude Juncker made defence a key plank of his manifesto.

The European political groups and how they see defence

Accordingly, the geopolitical risks facing Europe today will ensure that defence is a key policy issue. Interestingly, the political groupings and parties are already including security and defence in their campaigns and manifestos. The European elections are already marked by ideas such as the apparent need for an "EU defence commissioner" and "defence bonds", or the urgency of ensuring that €100bn is secured for EU defence production efforts. Most of Europe's major political groups and families are becoming increasingly vocal on the need to boost EU security and defence efforts.

The European People's Party (EPP) has already started to call for a European defence pillar that can ensure the continent's security in case of a breakdown of transatlantic relations. The EPP's campaign team have also stressed the importance of investing in defence capabilities such as cyber defence, drones and (they dared to say it) European nuclear deterrence. The EPP group have also recently settled on the incumbent commission president Von der Leyen to lead the charge into the next elections, which is important given President Von der Leyen's role in developing EU defence these past few years. There is also a clear emphasis on defence in the [EPP manifesto](#) for the 2024 European elections, with ideas such as more joint defence procurement, investment in advanced defence technologies and creating a single market for European defence, as well as the need for a defence council of ministers and the creation of an "EU defence budget". In this manifesto, "defence" is mentioned 26 times.

The Socialists and Democrats (S&D) have also adopted a 2024 election [manifesto](#), where "defence" is mentioned only five times. Nevertheless, the S&D group do acknowledge that an increasingly insecure world means that the EU "must take greater responsibility for its own security and defence". More specifically, the manifesto points to the critical need to develop the European defence industry through better spending and greater joint procurement. Interestingly, the S&D manifesto also highlights the crucial importance of cooperation in the fields of intelligence and the protection of critical infrastructure.

As for the liberals, Renew Europe has, for example, [called](#) for the establishment of a European military academy and a new European sovereignty fund to enhance Europe's defence industry. As with the EPP and S&D groupings, the liberals also stress the importance of strengthening the European defence industrial base, and they call for €100bn for defence investment at the EU level. In the [2024 manifesto](#), there is a clear attention to developing defence capabilities and the liberals call for a European Defence Union – like the EPP – focused on the establishment of a European commissioner for defence, the introduction of qualified

majority voting in foreign, defence and security policy and an EU seat at the UN Security Council.

The European Greens have also produced a 2024 manifesto that specifies that while the EU is a “peace project” it must strive for “greater security in geopolitical and economic terms”. Underlining the need to support Ukraine, the Greens’ [manifesto](#) prefers to refer to “security” rather than “defence” (there is only one specific mention of the word in the whole manifesto). The Greens group argues that climate and peace investments should increase in line with any military spending. They also support nuclear and conventional arms disarmament, as well as a ban on autonomous lethal weapons. Nevertheless, the Greens are the only political group that have stressed the importance of solidarity and mutual assistance (Article 42.7 Treaty on European Union) backed up by “cooperation on military capabilities” and through the promotion of “interoperability and coordinating procurement maintenance and supply systems”.

It is already clear that there is political consensus across the major European parties on the need to strengthen Europe’s defence industry.

The European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) have also produced an [electoral manifesto](#), which builds on recent statements by senior figures within the group on defence. However, bold ideas that were called for by the senior leadership of ECR a few months ago, including [calls](#) for the creation of a European army, have disappeared in the manifesto. Defence features prominently in the ECR manifesto, and it stresses the importance of developing the European defence industry. The manifesto also makes clear that the ECR are ‘highly sceptical about the creation of a defence union at the EU level’, which represents the group’s opposition to the creation of new posts in Brussels or the centralisation of powers on defence policy at the EU level.

Finally, the radical right and radical left groups have also stated their case on European defence. The European Left’s [manifesto](#) for 2024 rejects the idea of a more federated EU defence and instead stresses the necessity of maintaining national characteristics regarding defence (citing the so-called “Irish Clause”). The Left want a reduction in defence spending in Europe and full implementation of nuclear non-proliferation treaties. They largely characterise the military build-up in Europe as a negative development that follows “NATO’s instructions and resolutions”. While we await the Identity and Democracy Group’s official manifesto, the main line towards defence has always been that sovereignty must not be shared but should remain national, although there is the aim of securing Europe’s borders within this group.

EU defence policy in the wake of the European elections

These are all, of course, manifestos designed to secure seats in the European Parliament. How these somewhat diverse and bold ideas for EU security and defence will materialise, if at all, after the elections remains to be seen. The feasibility of many of the ideas will ultimately depend on the composition of the European Parliament. Whichever political groups win the day at the elections will have an opportunity to insist on manifesto pledges in the work programme of the next European Commission. Notwithstanding that EU member states will enable or temper any proposed defence policies based on collective national prerogatives, the parliament can influence the political direction of the next commission on defence.

The new legislature will have a vital say on how much of the EU's budget should be allocated to European defence in the coming years.

Indeed, if the core of the new parliament is pro-European and in favour of more EU defence integration, then this will weigh heavily in the priorities of the next commission. It is already clear that there is political consensus across the major European parties on the need to strengthen Europe's defence industry. Defence is therefore likely to be a major feature of the negotiations for the individual (re)crowned commission president. Should President Von der Leyen be reconfirmed in her role, it is likely that she will seek to implement the bulk of the EPP's manifesto promises and the consensus position on the European defence industry. Of course, the policy pledges implemented by the next commission will also reflect the bargain struck between member states and the parliament on key portfolios such as the high representative of the Union's foreign affairs and security policy/vice-president and the commissioner in charge of defence industry and space policy.

Should this pro-European, pro-defence core emerge, many of the manifesto ideas are likely to be reinforced or remoulded in light of the forthcoming presidential election in the United States at the end of 2024. In this context, should the second election of Donald Trump occur, many of the EU defence initiatives that have already been raised by the political groups may find renewed interest at the political level in the Commission and European Council. This is particularly the case with regard to the defence industry in Europe, where there is a consensus for more support for the industry among the major parties. In any case, the ongoing war in Ukraine is likely to lend continued weight to the need to develop Europe's defence industry and military capabilities. In this context, we should expect the ideas of the major political groups to influence EU defence policy after the elections, particularly where those ideas can be implemented by the European Commission.

Difficult choices ahead for EU defence

However, it is interesting to note that none of the political parties or groups are really calling for policies or initiatives that entail massive new outlays of resources from the EU budget. Perhaps with the exception of the liberals' call for a European sovereignty fund, the bulk of the manifesto pledges largely entail institutional re-engineering. This is to be expected, as many of the resource-intensive initiatives in defence have already been proposed by the European Commission. For example, the proposal for the European Defence Investment Programme (EDIP), which will see the EU extend its investments beyond defence research into joint capability development, was released in early March 2024 – directly in advance of the European elections. This proposal certainly meets many of the major political parties' aspirations for a stronger European defence industry, yet the political groups did not specifically propose this new initiative.

In any case initiatives such as the EDIP, while perhaps too complex to be made part of any formal political campaign (would citizens understand the term "EDIP"?), will be part of the post-electoral process. After the elections, the EU will need to negotiate the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for the period 2028-2034. As defence has been listed as a priority for the union, and as new initiatives such as the EDIP have emerged, it will be interesting to see how the European political parties position themselves in the budgetary negotiations. Remember that

negotiating the MFF is about deciding how policies should be financed at the EU level from the union budget. In this respect, the parties will have to decide what their ultimate political priorities are (i.e. what is the balance between investment in agriculture vs defence). In these negotiations, the new legislature will have a vital say on how much of the EU's budget should be allocated to European defence in the coming years, especially through the EDF and EDIP, among other defence-related priorities. This is when we shall see how committed to defence the major political parties are in practice.

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Young people are one of the most important allies of the European Union (EU) because the under-25s led the [record turnout](#) in the 2019 elections to the European Parliament – the highest since 1994 . In addition, [younger people’s support for the EU is significantly stronger](#) than the generations that came before them, a support that is reflected in participation in pro-European organisations like JEF (Young European Federalists). It is, then, very much in the interest of the EU (which still suffers from a notable democratic deficit) to involve the younger generation in campaigns and public policy, as it is conducive to its legitimisation and continuity into the future. Likewise, it is in the interest of European political parties to reach out to young people, as they are a valuable source of votes in the upcoming elections.

Yet this reality stands in contrast to the precarious situation of the younger population. Though it varies significantly from country to country, [the age that young adults move out of the family home has increased throughout Europe](#) as a result of the housing crisis. Moreover, 26.5% of Europeans aged 18-24 are at risk of poverty and social exclusion (Bristelle et al., 2024:20) due to precarious work and high youth unemployment rates. If in the early 20th century it was mainly older people who suffered from poverty, today it is the new generations (Palier, 2021). In addition, the mental health crisis has made suicide [the second leading cause of death for European youth](#).

This dire social situation leads to huge mistrust of politics and institutions. Study after study shows that young people are interested in politics but express a profound sense of alienation from the traditional partisan channels of participation and say they have little influence over political decisions (Bristelle et al., 2024). Moreover, while most young people seek to deepen democracy and support gender equality and environmentalism, there is a growing minority, especially men, who are drawn to the appeals to national identity of parties on the radical right, who reject feminist policies and who may even be less taken by democracy as a political system (Cordero and Roch, 2023). The challenge for the EU, then, is to address the demands of young people so that their grievances are not politicised by Eurosceptic forces.

It is very much in the interest of the EU (which still suffers from a notable democratic deficit) to involve the younger generation in campaigns and public policy, as it is conducive to its legitimation and continuity into the future.

A large majority of young adults' problems – the housing crisis, worsening mental health, difficulties in finding decent jobs, the crisis of democracy – are not unique to the new generations, but they do impact young people in particular. That is why the most important youth organisation in the EU, the [European Youth Forum](#), is calling for all public policy to contain a “youth perspective” that includes young people in decision-making processes and considers the effect policies have on them.

European political parties and young people

In terms of discourse, youth is not a divisive issue because all parties are interested in attracting the young vote, most share the opinion that young people face a challenging situation, and they all say they want to solve it. However, we can distinguish two main groups according to how much importance they place on youth matters. On one side are the Greens, European Left and Socialists, for whom youth concerns loom large in their discourse; on the other are the parties on the radical right that try to lure young people with their rejection of feminism and their identity-based appeals, but which lack an explicit discourse on the young. The European People's Party and the Liberals fall somewhere in between. They are closer to the first group but less generous regarding the social policies young people require.

European parties are striving to reach young voters through [social media campaigns](#) or [supporting their youth organisations](#), but as far as representation of candidates is concerned, the results are less impressive. Parties have made only a slight increase in the number of candidate lists led by young people, even though currently [only 6% of MEPs are under 35](#), despite the fact that one-fifth of all Europeans fall within the 18 to 35 age range. In France, for example, all the lead candidates except for the Socialist are under 40 and the head of the National Rally ticket, Jordan Bardella, is under 30. Bardella, in fact, is Marine Le Pen's great white hope for attracting young voters as he was the lead candidate in the last European elections at just 23. It is the Greens, however, who lead the way in young representation. They adopted [a resolution in 2023](#) in which they pledged to prioritise young people in pole positions, which has had tangible effects. The outcome is that one of their two *Spitzenkandidaten*, [Terry Reintke](#), is 36 and their lead candidate in Austria is a [23-year-old climate activist](#).

The consensus in favour of youth policies on the part of Greens, Socialist, Liberals and the EPP is reflected above all on an institutional level in campaigns by both the commission and the parliament. Education policies aside (the Bologna Process and Erasmus+ programme), young people were not a priority for the EU until the last legislative term. Following the 2019 elections, however, major institutional efforts have been made to reach out to young adults. The year 2022, for example, was declared [European Year of Youth](#), the [EU Youth Strategy](#) was created, the [Youth Guarantee](#) programme has been reinforced and this April saw the celebration of [European Youth Week 2024](#). Lastly, in line with the [Youth Test](#) proposed by the European Youth Forum, the European Commission announced the creation of a [Youth Check](#) that looks to include the participation of young people in the design and appraisal of EU policies.

But the importance of the institutional campaigns and discourses contrasts with the limited public policy action. This is partly because the EU has no powers over many issues affecting young people, such as the voting age or the housing crisis. It is on concrete policies, moreover, where most division and reluctance arise. One of the most hotly debated topics in this regard is lowering the voting age to 16. In May 2022, the European Parliament put it to the Council of the EU [to lower the age for casting ballots to 16](#), as is already the case in Austria, Belgium, Germany and Malta. While the final decision lies with the member states, the Liberals, Socialists, Greens and Left voted in favour, while the radical right voted against. The EPP was split and only half voted for the proposal.

Another major social policy for young adults, driven by the European Youth Forum, is [a ban on unpaid internships](#). The proposal to call for a directive to outlaw unpaid traineeships passed with broad parliamentary support, though it did meet with opposition from several MEPs from the radical right, and the [EPP tried to reduce it to a recommendation](#), not a legally binding directive. However, member countries are not yet required to apply the proposal in their national legislations.

In short, support for young people is consensual in terms of discourse, a representation issue for most parties and a matter of social and democratic policy for the Greens and Socialists. Paradoxically, while [many young people are drawn to the radical right](#) it lacks a discourse of its own on young adults and their real-world problems. The European People's Party is an enigma; it talks the talk on young people, but in key votes it could lean either way.

Support for young people is consensual in terms of discourse, a representation policy for most parties and a matter of social and democratic policy for the Greens and Socialists. Paradoxically, while many young people are drawn to the radical right it lacks a discourse of its own on young adults and their real-world problems.

Young people after the European elections

The priority the EU institutions give to young people does not appear likely to change significantly depending on the outcome of the elections, since all the parties are looking to attract the young vote, and the EU's legitimacy relies heavily on the new generations. What is at stake is whether youth policies will be bold enough to address the plight of young people, or half-hearted measures will be introduced instead. Given [Ursula von der Leyen's likely repetition as president of the commission](#), there are two basic scenarios depending on which groups the EPP turns to for support in the parliamentary votes.

The first and most likely scenario is one of continuity. Von der Leyen would rely on the Socialists and Liberals as she has done until now [for social issues](#), and would continue to advance pro-youth policies, though perhaps not at the pace young people require. The [Green](#), [Liberal](#) and [Socialist](#) manifestos pledge their support for policies they were already working on in this past term, such as banning unpaid internships, pushing to lower the voting age to 16, implementing the Youth Check, boosting the Erasmus+ programme or alleviating the housing crisis for young people. While the [European People's Party](#) also mentions the housing problem and unemployment in their manifesto, they only promise to implement the Youth Check. The Greens have done more than any other party to rally around youth, yet [the polls](#) seem to be indicating a setback for these groups in the June elections.

What is at stake in these elections is whether youth policies will be bold enough to address the plight of young people, or half-hearted measures will be introduced instead.

The second and increasingly likely scenario is one in which Von der Leyen looks for support from the parties on the [radical right on social issues](#). This would put a spoke in the wheel of youth policies, particularly those of a social nature. It would also seriously impact two issues that [are of enormous concern to young people](#): climate change and civil rights. Relying on the radical right for support [would slow down the European Green Deal or bring it a halt altogether](#) (see García and Noferini in this monograph) and legitimise all the reverses taking place in democratic quality and women's rights. [Young people comprise the population group whose members most identify as LGBTIQ+](#). They would therefore be particularly affected should the radical right continue to rise.

In addition, both radical right governments and those headed by the EPP with far-right support follow practices that run counter to the participation of young civil society. The government of Sweden, for example, axed assistance for the Swedish Youth Council, [the British Youth Council has announced its closure](#) for lack of funding and [Vox proposed scrapping the Madrid Youth Council](#). Radical right support for the EPP, then, could mean a cut in budgetary provisions for youth organisations like the European Youth Forum, which is the main instrument available to [young people to defend their rights](#).

Ultimately, young people's positive association with the European Union transcends the forces that prevail in the European Parliament or who heads the commission, as it is a structural element of the EU. However, young Europeans are in an extremely difficult situation and, therefore, what is at stake in the upcoming elections is not whether they will be supported or not, but rather whether they will be supported with the sufficient strength and speed to address the huge housing, labour market and climate crisis challenges they face.

Anyone under 30 has grown up with the European Union and most young people support, uphold and legitimise it. The forthcoming elections will determine whether the EU returns the favour, or it turns its back on them.

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Annex: Lead candidates for the various political groups in the European Parliament (2024)

In 2024, the lead candidate (spitzenkandidaten) system is at something of a low point. What began as a mechanism to increase citizen identification with European politics and reinforce the democratic nature of the process has now become a target of criticism from the Eurosceptic parties, who decline to take part and nominate a candidate.



■ **URSULA VON DER LEYEN**

(65 years)
Belgium, October 8th, 1958.

Party: Christian Democratic Union of Germany.
The current European Commission president is seeking a second term in the post and focusing her attention on defence, a subject she knows well having been German defence minister in Angela Merkel's government, where she also held two other portfolios between 2005 and 2019.



■ **NICOLAS SCHMIT**

(71 years)
Luxembourg, December 10th, 1953.

Party: Luxembourg Socialist Workers' Party.
The current European commissioner for employment and social rights has been chosen to lead the social democrats' campaign. Previously, he served as a minister in the Juncker government in his country.



■ **BAS EICKHOUT**

(48 years)
Netherlands, October 8th, 1976.

Party: Green Party.
Trained in chemistry and environmental science, he was a researcher at the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment in the Netherlands before officially entering politics. In 2019, he was the Greens' lead candidate alongside Ska Keller. This time, he will form a duo with Terry Reintke.



■ **TERRY REINTKE**

(36 years)
Germany, May 9th, 1987.

Party: Alliance 90/The Greens.
This political scientist, who studied at the Free University of Berlin, was a political advisor and served as the spokesperson of the Federation of Young European Greens between 2011 and 2013. In the European Parliament, she represents her group in the parliament intergroups on LGBTI rights, anticorruption and trade unions.



■ **WALTER BAIER**

(70 years)
Austria, February 9th, 1954.

Party: Communist Party of Austria (KPÖ).
An economist by training and seasoned in antifascist and pacifist activism, Baier was elected president of The Left group in December 2022. On this occasion, he was the group's only contender for lead candidate.



■ **The liberals from Renew Europe** will not be following the procedure of nominating a lead candidate, though they are opting for a joint platform called Renew Europe Now. The candidates will be Sandro Gozi (aged 56, from Italy's Italia Viva), Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmerman (aged 66, from the Free Democratic Party of Germany) and Valérie Hayer from France (aged 38, Renaissance), the current president of the Renew Europe group in the parliament.



■ **ANDERS VISTISEN**

(37 years)
Denmark, November 12th, 1987.

Party: Danish People's Party
While the ID group rejects the lead candidate system, it has nominated this Danish far-right MEP (and current leader of the group) to represent it in the pre-election debates among candidates.



■ **No candidate**

The ECR group is opposed to the lead candidate system and therefore declines to nominate any candidate.

■ **OTHER LEAD CANDIDATES**

As well as the main parliamentary groups, there are other political parties that nominate their own lead candidates

■ **European Free Alliance:**

MAYLIS ROSSBERG
(Germany, 23 years)
and RAÛL ROMEVA
(Spain, 52 years).

■ **European Christian Political Movement:**

VALERIU GHILEȚCHI
(Moldova, 64 years).

Source: Compiled by CIDOB.

SECTION II

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The 2024 European elections in Germany take place not only amid a strained international situation, but also under a shadow of a much-weakened government coalition. The campaign only started in public in early May, with public political discourse currently dominated by the accusations of Chinese and Russian influence surrounding the radical right and anti-EU party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD). A physical attack on a leading Social Democrat candidate in the eastern German state of Saxony is also overshadowing the European election campaign, sparking a debate about political culture and the rise of extremist forces. Furthermore, the tense security situation in Ukraine and the Middle East as well as Germany's current economic challenges are focal points of the discourse, with little specific discussions on EU issues. In consequence, the results are expected to largely mirror national election results, including significant losses for the governing parties, with gains for smaller and new parties. The impact of the scandals surrounding the AfD on the polls remains to be seen, but a loss of electoral support can be expected.

In general, the three parties forming the "traffic light" coalition since 2021 (the social democratic SPD, liberal FDP and Greens) are declared pro-European, as is the largest opposition party, the Christian democratic CDU/CSU. In this vein, the coalition agreement sets a very strong pro-European agenda, including the stated aim of deeper integration and the option of treaty change. However, in practice the coalition has often been characterised by public infighting, including disagreements on selected EU policies, such as parts of the Green Deal legislation, or the degree of military support for Ukraine. In addition, the weakness of the traffic light coalition went together with a rise of the AfD, but also of a new populist party from the left (*Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht*, BSW), which also has a clear Eurosceptic programme. In consequence, these European Parliament (EP) elections will likely see the highest ever share of Eurosceptic MEPs from Germany.

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A lacklustre start to the campaign

The SPD (affiliated with Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats; S&D,) is running again with their lead candidate and vice president of the EP, Katarina Barley. Given her firm stance on the rule of law, the [party manifesto](#) places particular emphasis on this topic. With the claim "Germany's strongest voices for Europe", the campaign also aims to establish a close link between German national politics and Europe, capitalising on the political weight of Olaf Scholz. Although this is consistent with the European Socialists, their lead candidate Nicolas Schmitt is hardly featured at all in the SPD campaign.

On the side of the Greens (Greens/EFA), their lead candidate Terry Reintke is only really known to EU insiders in Germany, despite her high level of recognition at the European level. At over 100 pages, the [Green Party's manifesto](#) is arguably the longest in the German EU election campaign. A clear focus in the election campaign is not yet apparent, rather major issues such as peace and security in Europe, welfare and climate protection and the protection of democracies in Europe are at the centre of the campaign. Besides the CDU, the campaign around Reintke has been the most consistent in highlighting the European Greens and her role as Europe-wide lead candidate.

The best-known lead candidate among the German public after European Commission (EC) President Von der Leyen is Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann (FDP, affiliated with Renew Europe), currently chair of the Bundestag's defence committee. She has gained a high national profile through her vocal support for Ukraine and her fierce clashes with Chancellor Olaf Scholz. The FDP's campaign is placing full emphasis on Strack-Zimmermann as a tough-talking politician. Its [manifesto](#), however, displays a rather traditional liberal tone. Among the most important topics are cutting red tape and strengthening the subsidiarity principle, as well as a focus on a more market-oriented EU with more free trade and less regulation. Despite the fact that Strack-Zimmermann is one of the lead candidates of the European liberal camp, there is no special emphasis or visibility of that, exemplified by the fact that her participation in the Maastricht debate was not prominently advertised.

The conservative CDU (affiliated with European People's Party; EPP), with its lead candidate Ursula von der Leyen, is unwilling to abandon its national role as a critic of the traffic light coalition in the EU election campaign. It is therefore to be expected that initiatives such as postponing the ban on combustion engines will be points of contention in the CDU's election campaign, aiming at mobilising the German electorate. However, current commission president Von der Leyen has not been featured prominently in the CDU campaign and her role as the EPP's European lead candidate has not been over-emphasised so far, taking a back seat to her role as commission president and her role as national lead candidate. The [joint election manifesto of CDU and CSU](#), is heavily securitised and puts special emphasis on the overarching call for a stronger EU foreign and security policy and on internal security. The Green Deal, however, the flagship initiative of Von der Leyen's term as EC president, is referenced only two times in the manifesto. Bavaria's sister party, the CSU, unsurprisingly opted for the current leader of the

EPP group in the EP, Manfred Weber, and is campaigning for the support of Bavarians with the slogan “For a strong Bavaria in Europe”.

The campaign of the radical right AfD (so far affiliated with Identity and Democracy; ID) was first severely damaged by revelations surrounding suspected Russian influence and ultimately following the arrest of a close employee of lead candidate Maximilian Krah, accused of spying for China. As a result, both the lead candidate Krah and second-placed candidate Petr Bystron, whose offices and homes were recently raided by German police after accusation of taking Russian bribery, will not play a prominent role in the final stretches of the election campaign. Beyond this, the AfD is campaigning for an end to the EU in its current form and wants to create “a new home for a community of sovereign states” but stops short of openly campaigning for “Dexit”. The [manifesto](#), meanwhile, calls for a restoration of energy relations with Russia as well as an end to economic sanctions and severely restricting the influx of migrants. The European anchoring of the party is in doubt, as well, after controversial statements by Krah on the Nazi past provided the final argument for Marine Le Pen to [publicly denounce future cooperation](#) with the AfD in the next EP, where it thus will likely have to sit non-aligned.

Taking into account the media and social media presence of the top candidates, this is consistent with the ranking of the level of public awareness outlined above. In the German-language news publications published between January and April 2024, Ursula von der Leyen was the most frequently mentioned candidate, accounting for 47% of the news volume. Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann was a close second, with 38% of the mentions, presumably due to her prominent role in the German security policy debate. In contrast, Barley, Weber and Krah were mentioned approximately equally often (around 5% each), while Terry Reintke was significantly underrepresented during this period. A similar pattern emerges when considering social media presence, with Von der Leyen likely having the highest reach on X and Instagram, closely followed by Strack-Zimmermann. After a long period in which Germany’s political landscape on TikTok was almost exclusively dominated by the AfD, an increasing number of parties and politicians from across the democratic spectrum have been trying to establish a TikTok presence and translate their European election campaigns onto the platform using the slogan “reclaim TikTok”.

In addition to the established parties, the EP elections are also viewed as a chance to gain Germany-wide visibility for a number of smaller and/or new parties. Altogether, 35 parties have been registered to compete in the 2024 German EP elections. Part of the reason why the EP elections are so attractive for small parties in Germany is that there is no threshold, unlike in national elections, and the comparatively high number of 96 MEPs means that a party can win a seat with less than 1% of the vote. In 2024, the pan-European Volt Party, the Pirate Party, as well as the *Freie Wähler* (Renew) and the new BSW Party hope to win seats. Also of note is the *Demokratische Allianz für Vielfalt und Aufbruch* (Democratic Alliance for Diversity and Renewal; DAVA), a party funded by German nationals predominantly of Turkish origin, who state their aim is to fight for better integration of migrants. The party is accused of close connections to Erdogan’s AKP and aiming to get a voice for the Turkish president into the EP. Its electoral chances are untested, as the EP elections are its first ever elections in Germany.

The final result of the AfD will send an important political signal, as the party has become even more radicalised than most of its counterparts within the ID group. Given the recent tensions between Le Pen and the AfD, it could even contribute to a split or reordering of the radical right in the EP.

An election to punish the national government

Looking ahead to election day, the polls promise a difficult day for the coalition parties. In terms of expected outcome, the few polls that were conducted specifically for the EP elections predict a result very close to regular nationwide polls for the next Bundestag elections.

Polls forecast the CDU/CSU to be the largest party (close to 30%), which would make it one of, if not the largest, national delegations in the EP again, and a leading force in the EPP. Second place is more closely contested, with the AfD currently polling second, just above the SPD, on around 16%. This would be a significant improvement for the AfD (which scored 11% in 2019), although some polls in 2023 placed it at well over 20% and competing for first place. The SPD, meanwhile, polled very badly in 2019 already (with 15.8%) and could therefore even slightly improve its results. The Greens stand to suffer the heaviest losses, after their record result of 20.5% in 2019 and are currently polling at around 15%, whereas the FDP could fall below the symbolically important 5% threshold. Finally, both the BSW and the FW are expected to establish a nationwide foothold with close to 6%, respectively around 3.5%.

Overall, the trend in Germany points towards losses for the mainstream, pro-European parties. The parties of the former “grand coalition”, despite the CDU/CSU lead, would be well below 50% combined, whereas just ten years ago in 2014 they scored 62.6% together. Adding the Greens and the FDP, the traditional mainstream parties in Germany jointly obtained 76.7% of the votes in 2014 and are now polling together at roughly 60%. In contrast, the share of populist, Eurosceptic or anti-EU parties (in particular AfD and BSW) could rise well above 20% for the first time.

A warning shot, but not a breakdown moment

The expected results also colour the expectations for the political effects of the European elections, first and foremost for national politics. Often viewed together with the upcoming regional elections in Saxony, Thuringia and Brandenburg in the autumn of 2024 (three Eastern German *Länder* where the AfD polls particularly high) the expectations are one of a warning shot to the governing parties. If the final results prove close to the polls, the CDU/CSU would underline its ambition to return to leading the government after the next German elections, while the frictions within the present government are likely to increase, with particular pressure on the FDP. An early breakdown of the coalition, however, remains unlikely.

In terms of EU policy, the repercussions are likely to be limited. The CDU/CSU is anticipated to retain its leading position within the EPP, and the German government overall is likely to support Ursula von der Leyen as commission president if the EPP becomes the largest party again. If not, the German Greens have obtained the right to propose the next German EU commissioner. The Greens, due to their prominent position within the European Greens/EFA group, would be weakened, whereas the SPD can expect to retain its position as a strong, but not dominant force within the currently Spanish-led S&D group.

The final result of the AfD will also send an important political signal, as the party has become even more radicalised up to the point of being thrown out of the ID group by Le Pen, including allusions to an EU exit in its party manifesto. If the party scores better than the polls predict, despite the spying scandals, it could embolden its more radical sections, whereas a weaker than expected showing would affirm the strategy of radical right parties working towards a more moderate image, like Le Pen's *Rassemblement National*. Given the announcement of the RN, the Italian Lega and the Czech SPD (all ID) to no longer work with the AfD, it could even contribute to a reordering of the radical right in the EP.

As the 2024 European elections approach, the German debate is currently characterised by heightened polarisation and a strong national focus. At the same time, the politicisation of the EU election campaign has increased compared to 2019, while the challenges of a growing radical right spectrum and declining support for mainstream pro-EU parties remain.

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“I will fight every day to improve the European Union and to defend it”. That was French President Emmanuel Macron’s promise ahead of the last European Parliament (EP) elections in 2019. Five years later, his promise has turned into a **stark warning**: the European Union (EU) must make bold choices to “adapt” to new geopolitical realities or risk “dying”. European citizens face a choice between electing politicians who want a stronger EU or opting for those who want to break it.

For many French citizens, the June EU elections are not really about Europe. Rather, they are about voicing their support for or discontent with the president and the government. Worse still, **a recent poll by Odoxa** shows that about 20% of French voters do not know the election is happening and that around 50% of eligible voters are thinking of abstaining. These numbers are a blow to a French president who has made the EU a cornerstone of his domestic and foreign policy. The result is largely a foregone conclusion. **Late April 2024 polling by IPSOS**, another French company, suggests that Marine Le Pen’s far-right party *Rassemblement National* (RN) is expected to gain more than 30% of seats, with Macron’s list *Besoin d’Europe* trailing behind at 17% (significantly below the 22.24% they secured in 2019). Eric Zemmour’s far-right party *Reconquête* is also expected to secure 5% of the vote.

The consequences of a far-right victory in June would be significant for French national politics. Jordan Bardella, who heads the RN’s list, has already said that his party would call for a vote of no confidence in the French government and a fresh round of legislative elections. This would be bad news for Emmanuel Macron whose coalition already failed to secure a comfortable majority at the June 2022 French parliamentary elections. A slimmer majority, or the loss of it, would make it almost impossible for the French government to pass new legislation with the consent of the parliament. A strong result for the RN would also bolster Le Pen’s credentials ahead of the 2027 presidential election – but it would not necessarily guarantee her the keys to the Elysée Palace.

Such an outcome would have mixed results for France’s role inside the EU. With fewer MEPs, Macron’s support inside the EP would certainly diminish. However, France would remain a key player inside the

A strong result for the *Rassemblement National* would bolster Le Pen's credentials ahead of the 2027 presidential election – but it would not necessarily guarantee her the keys to the Elysée Palace.

European Council. There are three reasons for this. For starters, France's presidential-parliamentary system grants significant decision-making powers to the president, especially over EU affairs. Second, France is the EU's second largest member state, so its voice and opinions count. And despite his sometimes controversial statements, the French president still has more allies than enemies across EU capitals. Finally, Emmanuel Macron will do everything he can to leave in 2027 with a strong track record in Brussels as part of his legacy. To deliver on that ambition, he will need to muster the support of the rest of the EU.

A divided political landscape and little knowledge of the EU

France's political landscape is incredibly fragmented and this polarisation is visible in the polling on the EP elections. As it stands, French voters will have a choice between several lists, which include either one party (for example, the centre-right *Les Républicains*) or a group of parties (for example, the *Ensemble* list, which includes four centrist parties: Macron's *Renaissance*, former French Prime Minister Edouard Philippe's *Horizon*, former Justice Minister François Bayrou's *MoDem* and Jean-Christophe Lagarde's *UDI* - Union of Democrats and Independents). Only those lists securing at least 5% of the vote will be able to send their MEPs to the European Parliament.

The RN is currently leading the polls with over 30% of voter intention. It is followed by Macron's centrist *Ensemble* list at 17% and Glucksmann's centre-left coalition of the *Parti Socialiste* and *Place Publique* at 14.3%. Far-left party *La France Insoumise*, the centre-right *Les Républicains* and the Greens are all expected to secure between 6% and 8% of the vote. Finally, *Reconquête*, another far-right party, is expected to secure 5.5% of the vote. For President Macron, anything short of 20% of the vote share would be a huge blow. This probably explains the recent flurry of Macron interviews on Europe for the *Economist*, French national newspapers and his short videos on social media where he answers questions from the public. But the reality is that it has become much harder for President Macron to single out his EU stance from that of other parties. Unlike in 2019, no French party is advocating leaving the EU – which is unsurprising given that 62% of French voters want France to remain inside the EU. This jumps to 80% for voters aged between 18 and 24 and 86% for those working in the agricultural sector.

However, polling also shows that around 57% of French citizens think the EU will be weaker in five years' time. French voters across the political spectrum are calling for changes to the way the EU operates. Only Macron's list is supportive of the EU in its current form – but even it has questioned some of the EU's recent decisions, including its stance on free trade; it has also called for fewer and smarter EU regulations.

In terms of voter concerns, immigration is a top concern in France at 41.7%, followed by climate change at 36.3% and the future of European agriculture at 35.3%. However, when asked what issues will determine their final choice in the June elections, French voters list reduced purchasing power (22%), growing immigration concerns

(15%) and a stretched healthcare system (9%) as the principal drivers. Unsurprisingly then, a lot of the election campaign has focused on whether the EU makes France more or less competitive (including on energy policy and what support it provides to French industry and agriculture); more or less safe (all parties now condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, though the far-left and far-right remain sceptical about EU defence); and more or less able to tackle major areas of concerns (such as immigration and climate change).

For a [majority of French citizens](#), this election will be the opportunity to vote on national issues, rather than European ones. Some 37% have also said they would use this vote to voice their discontent with Emmanuel Macron and/or the French government. What the campaign so far has made clear is that most French citizens do not feel like they know the EU or understand what it does. Only [24% believe](#) they are “well informed” about EU decisions. Fewer still feel France exercises any influence in Brussels.

A zoom in on the radical-right and a centre-left revival

The radical right has always tended to do well in EP elections. This year, it is expected to obtain its highest score yet. There are several reasons for this. For starters, their anti-EU rhetoric, which deterred many from casting their vote for them in 2014 and 2019, has been toned down to the point where it has almost disappeared. Neither Marine Le Pen's RN nor Eric Zemmour's *Reconquête* are calling for a “Frexit”. Instead, like most of the other parties, they have preferred to emphasise the need for “EU reform”. In reality, many of their proposals – such as leaving the EU energy market or giving French law supremacy over EU law – would go much further than simply reforming the EU. Were they to come to pass, they would alter, divide and lead the EU to a standstill – something their opponents have been keen to point out.

Second, these parties, especially the RN, are seen as the main opposition in France. Their gradual normalisation, and adept use of social media, makes them one of, if not the most, talked about parties in French politics. Jordan Bardella is now the second most popular politician in France at 38%, only 4 points behind former Prime Minister Edouard Philippe. Marine Le Pen comes third at 35%. The RN also has a lot of reach on social media platforms like TikTok. The EU Parliament Identity and Democracy (ID) group, of which RN is a member, reaches on average over [1 million users on TikTok](#). What's more, both Jordan Bardella (RN) and Marion Maréchal (*Reconquête*) are well-known in France, certainly more than Valérie Hayer, who heads Macron's list.

Third, the radical right has benefitted from the centre-right *Les Républicains'* internal divisions and loss of popular support, with many of their voters choosing to cast their vote in favour of centrist parties or the RN. Even the radical right's proximity to Russia seems not to have abated its support base. Both the RN and *Reconquête* have publicly condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine – and few seem to mind the fact that [RN voted against](#) EU Parliament resolutions on providing financial and military support to Ukraine.

While his influence inside the European Parliament is likely to take a hit, we can still expect Macron and the French government to be active and vocal inside the Council. Whether France continues to be influential after 2027 is an open question.

On the other side of the political spectrum, Raphaël Glucksmann's centre-left list is also expected to do well – with some suggesting it will get between 14% and 16% of the vote. His call for greater action to mitigate climate change is particularly popular with younger voters, including with centre-left voters who had previously voted for Emmanuel Macron in 2017 and 2022. He is also one of the most visible politicians in the EU election campaign.

Macron: weak(er) in France but still strong inside the EU

It is far too early to say who would win France's presidential election in 2027. But certainly, Emmanuel Macron will be thinking about what legacy he wants to leave. With the rise of the radical right, Macron will probably try to cement his credentials as a key leader and visionary for the EU. France's European influence grew significantly in the first years of Macron's leadership. A lot of this was down to Macron's personal style and ideas, which he first formulated in his 2017 Sorbonne speech and continued to champion, most notably during [France's six-month EU Council presidency in 2022](#). His latest Sorbonne speech, which he gave in 2024, gave further indication of what he was hoping to accomplish over the next five years.

A weaker Macron domestically could have some implications for France's role inside the EU. For starters, it may make it harder for the French government to pass necessary reform initiatives, for example to reduce public spending and debt, which many frugal member states worry about. A more volatile and fragmented political scene could also occupy a lot of his attention, as it did for the first year of his second term. At the same time, the French president will still have a large say over EU policy and is unlikely to shy away from playing that role. Macron knows that to get anything done inside the EU, he needs the support of a majority of member states, but also to work closely with the EU Commission and the EU Parliament.

In his first year in office, Macron had visited all EU capitals. In 2019, his MEPs represented the largest delegation in the centrist parliamentary grouping Renew, which ensured his views were heard in parliament too. Finally, he also made sure he had a say over the allocation of the EU's top jobs (Von der Leyen was long seen as one of Macron's picks). While his influence inside the European Parliament is likely to take a hit, we can still expect Macron and the French government to be active and vocal inside the Council – and be heavily involved in the formation of the new EU Commission.

Whether France continues to be influential after 2027 is an open question and will depend on who becomes the next French president. For now, all bets are off.

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In October 2022, a coalition formed by Giorgia Meloni's *Fratelli d'Italia* (the leading party), Matteo Salvini's *Lega* and Silvio Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* won the Italian national elections, taking over from a grand coalition government led by Mario Draghi. While *Forza Italia*, currently led by former EU Commissioner and former President of the European Parliament Antonio Tajani, is part of the European People's Party (EPP) and an active member of the pro-European conservatives, *Lega* belongs to the extreme right and Eurosceptic group Identity and Democracy (ID), together with the French *Rassemblement National* (RN) and the German *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD). Giorgia Meloni is the president of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), who are inspired by liberal conservatism, advocate nationalist Euroscepticism and are antifederalist. However, since coming to power in Italy, she has chosen a more pragmatic and cooperative attitude towards the European Union (EU) institutions and promoted a rapprochement with the EPP, in particular by building a special relationship with the current commission president, Ursula von der Leyen, and the European Parliament president, Roberta Metsola.

At the national level, the ruling coalition appears to be internally cohesive enough to securely maintain the continuity of the current government in office. Yet the different approaches to the EU among Italy's ruling parties are generating some tensions during the campaign for the European Parliament (EP) elections and are likely to create even more struggles in the process of appointing the new EU leadership. If *Forza Italia* is keen to support "more Europe", *Lega* is explicitly advocating for "less Europe, more Italy", while Giorgia Meloni's slogan is "Italy changes Europe". More generally, the debate among the political forces will be characterised by a marked polarisation, both in terms of approaches to Europe and internal matters. The most significant confrontation will be between the government leader Giorgia Meloni and the leader of the main opposition party, the centre-left *Partito Democratico* (PD), Elly Schlein, two women whose visions of Europe, political agendas and personal styles are poles apart.

Since coming to power in Italy, Meloni has chosen a more pragmatic and cooperative attitude towards the European Union (EU) institutions and promoted a rapprochement with the EPP.

Campaigns late in coming

Italy's major political parties were extremely late in launching their campaigns for the EP elections, with the presentation of European political programmes and candidate lists coming only at the end of April. This is not unusual. In the first months of 2024, political debate had been catalysed by three regional elections in Sardinia (won by a centre-left coalition) and in Abruzzo and Basilicata (won by the government coalition). Still, the three regional elections were portrayed by national political leaders and media as crucial tests for the popularity of Giorgia Meloni's government on the path towards the EP elections. At the same time, it is clear that political dynamics at the regional and national level remain very distinctive. In particular, Italian regional electoral law, which is based on a majoritarian principle of representation, provides strong incentives for political parties to form large coalitions during the campaign. Italian EP electoral law, meanwhile, is based on a proportional system with a threshold at 4%. Thus, it favours more competitive attitudes among all the parties, which in fact approached the election campaign autonomously.

As far as Italian citizens' attitude is concerned, the April 2024 [Eurobarometer survey](#) reveals a growing interest among Italian voters in the upcoming European elections amidst a delicate political moment at international and national level. A total of 59% of the Italian respondents expressed interest in the June 2024 voting, up by 8 percentage points from the last EP elections in 2019. Nevertheless, the importance of national elections still outweighs the European ones, with 54% of Italians holding this view. Economic issues remain a priority, but security concerns are growing, particularly due to the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Overall, Italian perceptions of the EU remain negative, reflecting entrenched Euroscepticism, likely fuelled by the political discourse and public debate. Only 45% of Italians consider EU membership a good thing. Against this backdrop, it is not surprising to observe a nationalist and mildly Eurosceptic focus in the campaign so far, represented mostly as an occasion for counting the political weight of individual parties and of their leaders, with only limited attention to EU and transnational topics.

The tone of the campaign was set by the *Fratelli d'Italia* convention in Pescara, on April 27th-28th. On that occasion, Giorgia Meloni's key message to the electorate was to give her the mandate to bring to the EU the same political change that she brought to Italy in October 2022 and send the left-wing parties into opposition at the EU level too. Meloni will lead the *Fratelli d'Italia* list in all five Italian constituencies, but she announced that she would not take the seat if elected. Her candidacy primarily aims to attract as many voters as possible to express their preferences for her party. When announcing her candidacy, Meloni urged her voters to write only her first name, Giorgia, on the ballot paper, "[because I am and will always be one of you](#)", relying on her personal leadership and charisma, but also displaying a populist attitude very much in line with the hard-right political tradition.

Matteo Salvini outlined the *Lega* stance for the upcoming European elections mostly through social media, advocating for a centre-right

alliance while distancing his party from Macron, the left, Von der Leyen and Draghi. He hinted at differing views from *Forza Italia* and Giorgia Meloni. Salvini proposed reinstating youth military and community service, to promote “respect and good manners”. He has also chosen a controversial figure for the EP election, General Roberto Vannacci, who was dismissed from his post by the defence minister due to a contentious book and is [under investigation for alleged racial incitement](#), as the *Lega* lead candidate. The choice aims to revive support amid dwindling popularity, leveraging Vannacci’s celebrity, but also at the risk of generating tensions within the party’s nomenclature and particularly among the electorate in the north of Italy that traditionally voted for *Lega* for its stance on economic matters and less on identitarian aspects.

Antonio Tajani has also expressed his personal commitment to the upcoming European elections, highlighting the importance of preserving the legacy of Silvio Berlusconi and asserting the significance of *Forza Italia*’s role within the EPP. This is reflected in the *Forza Italia* symbol, which displays the words “Berlusconi for President” at its centre and includes the EPP logo. [Forza Italia’s electoral campaign](#) has expressed traditional pro-European conservative values, highlighting how the EU is built on freedom, security and dignity, uniting national identities under Judeo-Christian roots and identity.

As far as the opposition parties are concerned, a rather different choice was made by the PD, which opted for a campaign that does not display the candidates’ faces on election manifestos, aligning with its history of avoiding personalisation. During the launch of the PD’s campaign for the European elections, titled “[The Europe we want](#)”, the party secretary, Elly Schlein, focused on social themes such as public healthcare, immigration, and the minimum wage. She talked about “clean air” and “jobs”, addressing both climate change and social justice. Schlein’s presentation also touched upon many domestic political issues: representation law, “differentiated autonomy”, institutional reforms and premiership, and freedom of the press. Some more controversial foreign policy issues, including the party’s stance on the Russian war on Ukraine, remained somehow side-lined.

The *Movimento Cinque Stelle* launched a citizens’ participation campaign in February 2024 in order to draft its electoral programme for the European elections. Thus, the entire campaign has focused on the message of providing direct involvement for Italian citizens, in sharp rhetorical contrast to Brussels’ bureaucratic elites, and being against providing military support to Ukraine. The party’s leader, former Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, is struggling to present himself as the alternative to the current government and steal the role of Giorgia Meloni’s main opponent from Elly Schlein.

The liberal centrist forces of the so-called “*Terzo polo*” represented by + *Europa*, led by Emma Bonino, *Italia Viva*, led by Matteo Renzi, and *Azione*, led by Carlo Calenda, split into two different blocks to run separately in the EP elections, with + *Europa* and *Italia Viva* regrouped [under the *Stati Uniti d’Europa* list](#). Both advocate for a federalist vision of Europe.

If a stronger right and radical right presence does not necessarily equate to an openly anti-European stance, it is likely to contribute to reshaping the EU from within by normalising right-wing views and pushing the European agenda towards more conservative positions.

What do the polls tell us?

At the beginning of May, voting intention polls confirmed Giorgia Meloni's *Fratelli d'Italia* as the first political party at around 28.5%, followed by the centre-left PD at around 21% and the *Movimento Cinque Stelle* at around 16%. The other parties of the government coalition, *Forza Italia* and *Lega*, are expected to score less than 10%. Other political forces that could reach the 4% threshold necessary to gain European Parliament seats according to Italian electoral law are the leftist party *Verdi e Sinistra* and the liberal centre (*Stati Uniti d'Europa* and *Azione*). Giorgia Meloni can still count on a personal approval rating of more than 47% of Italian citizens, even if the general support for the government is declining. Despite the huge gap in terms of predicted election results, the government coalition will survive the European elections with the goal of completing the national legislative term to 2027. As for the forces in the opposition, the PD and the *Movimento Cinque Stelle* tried to form a coalition at local level in the last regional elections, but their strategy failed in two out of three cases.

At EU level, a possible alignment of the ECR with the EPP could bring *Fratelli d'Italia* and *Forza Italia* closer along the lines of a cooperative strategy with European institutions, but it would leave *Lega* outside. In fact, *Lega's* allies in the ID group are too extreme to be welcomed in a possible coalition supporting Ursula von der Leyen in a second mandate and Giorgia Meloni has no interest in pushing for an alliance with Matteo Salvini in the EU. The *Partito Democratico*, for its part, has just signed a declaration of the Party of European Socialists that it would not work with radical right forces in the next European Parliament. Therefore, the results of the elections in Italy are likely to have a significant impact on the overall political dynamics and orientation of the next European legislature. In particular, if a stronger right and radical right presence does not necessarily equate to an openly anti-European stance, it is likely to contribute to reshaping the EU from within by normalising right-wing views and pushing the European agenda towards more conservative positions. This shift could impact areas like single market reforms by moving in a more protectionist direction, making the implementation of the Green Deal more difficult, and further pushing the externalisation of migration policies.

Looking ahead: Italian politics and the EU

The Italian government's EU stance will not change dramatically after these elections. Giorgia Meloni will most probably continue to capitalise on her renewed activism in Europe and use it for domestic purposes, especially when it comes to the externalisation of migration management and the firm reaction to the war on Ukraine. She will try to make the most of the election results to secure a major portfolio in the next European Commission and more generally to weigh in on the negotiations for the top positions in Europe. The future of the PD will depend on the outcome of the polls, 20% (and a few points above the *Movimento Cinque Stelle*) being the psychological threshold that will spell victory or defeat and determine the fate of its current leadership and political line. As usual, domestic political matters will dominate the electoral campaign and influence the vote of Italian citizens, and they

will continue to do so until EP elections are Europeanised through the creation of transnational electoral lists and the standardisation of the electoral procedures. At the same time, however, the polarisation of the political debate will place the Italian electorate before very different ideas of Europe, thus making citizens' choices a telling indication of their preferences for the future of the European project.

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Spanish Europeanism resist politicization

Spain is currently the only EU member state with a left-wing coalition government formed by a socialist party, the PSOE (Socialists & Democrats), and a [radical left](#) movement, *Sumar*.¹ The position of the coalition and most of the opposition parties regarding the EU reflects that of Spanish society, who have had a very positive perception of the EU over time, seeing it as a source of democracy, prosperity and stability.

The Spanish two-party system paid the price of the financial crisis (2008), not the European institutions. The result was a more fragmented political system which saw the emergence of new parties. Some political forces from the radical left voiced their discontent with the economic measures adopted at that time, although it was not a form of Euroscepticism, rather a [defence of a different integration project](#).² Nowadays, this fragmented scene has consolidated but the newcomers share a sound pro-Europeanism, each one with its nuances. The only party that has presented a clear Eurosceptic vision is the radical right party *Vox* (European Conservatives and Reformists) even if it does not advocate for leaving the EU, but rather for preventing a federalised trend and retaining the supremacy of national sovereignty.

However, this fragmentation has come with greater polarisation in internal affairs. At EU level, this did not imply questioning Spain's membership of the bloc but an increasing politicisation of the EU institutions for domestic partisan confrontation, to the point that opposition parties and the government have transferred their political battle to the European institutions. In other words, as a result of solid Spanish pro-Europeanism, [the political forces use the EU as a source of legitimacy to confront one another](#). Therefore, European affairs are still regarded through national lenses and the national dimension ends up dragging Spanish political parties to their national reality.

1. *Sumar* is a type of political movement that includes parties to the left of the Socialists, Greens, post-communist and progressive regional parties, whose MEPs will join the Greens, the European Free Alliance and the European United Left/Nordic Green Left.
2. As an example, the electoral programme of *Podemos* in 2015 defended a deeper Common Security and Defence Policy.

When national becomes European

Opposition parties and the government have transferred their political battle to the European institutions. In other words, as a result of solid Spanish pro-Europeanism, the political forces use the EU as a source of legitimacy to confront one another.

Three main issues have impacted Spain's recent political context. First, the breakdown of the two-party system in place since the restoration of democracy: the last legislative term was the first to see a coalition government and, as a result of the general elections in 2023, it is also the first time that the government has not been led by the party that came first at the polls. Second, an increasing polarisation of the internal political debate, which has led to a politicisation of European affairs. And third, the prominence of regional parties in the national debate and their involvement in the governability of the country, with a special mention for the Catalan situation. The three issues are interrelated: the breakdown of the political system allowed for new and regional political parties to carry more weight in the governance of the country, which increased the polarisation. A polarised society favoured the breakthrough of non-mainstream political options. And the Catalan situation worked as a catalyst where polarisation spiked, and new political parties could grow.

These three main issues have led to Spain being in a state of permanent political campaign. Since 2014, Spain has had five national elections. In 2019, Spaniards voted in national elections in April, just a few months before the European elections. The Socialists came first in this parliamentary election and they wanted to exhaust all possibilities of forming a solo government. Thus, they refused to form a government immediately after the national elections and made the elections to the European Parliament a second round. As a result, the national dynamic prevailed over the European dimension of the elections.

This same logic will play out for the European elections of 2024. The Socialist party came in second in the latest snap national election, held in July 2023, but managed to stay in power after securing a coalition government with *Sumar* and the support of different regional parties, mostly from Catalonia and the Basque Country. The Popular Party (PP), which had come in first place but failed to build a majority, has continuously harassed the government thereafter.

Since then, and before the European elections in June, three regions in Spain – Galicia, the Basque Country and Catalonia – have held elections. Although they have been used to draw conclusions in national terms, regional parties and dynamics played the leading roles. This scenario implies that the political debate will focus on how those regional elections might impact the national scenario (especially those in Catalonia, where the Socialists won). The same will apply to the European elections, which will also be viewed through a national lens. The prime minister publicly raising the possibility of resigning recently, denouncing a campaign against his wife on the part of the radical right, has heightened the partisan confrontation.

However, despite the increasing pressure to read the June 9th elections in national terms, there are some issues that have a European dimension and will be treated as such during the election campaign.

What are these elections about? Topics and faces

In its electoral programme for the general elections in 2023, the *Partido Popular* (PP) had more in common with the PSOE and *Sumar* regarding EU affairs than with the radical right party Vox. Vox has the strongest Eurosceptic views, putting the emphasis on the need to defend the union from illegal migration, to preserve the national identity from a bureaucratic Brussels and to push back against the green agenda. In order to confront two different models of understanding the EU, the government parties have chosen their lead candidates accordingly.

The Socialists will play their cards on the green agenda. In the political cycle (2019-2024), the Spanish government has been especially vocal and ambitious regarding green issues. This has been driven by current Deputy Prime Minister for the Ecological Transition Teresa Ribera, the leading candidate on the Socialist list. She arguably aspires to the climate change portfolio in the European Commission, so it is expected that she will try to put the fight against climate change in the centre of the agenda, thus confronting Vox and the PP on those issues. The lead candidate from *Sumar* is the former director of the Spanish Commission for Refugees. The PP, Vox and *Ciudadanos* have presented lead candidates who were already MEPs and *Podemos* is fielding former Minister for Equality Irene Montero.

In any case, although the political forces may raise topics such as the green agenda or migration, they are not among the main priorities for *Spaniards*. When asked about which issues should dominate the European campaign, Spain is among the member states which most highlight the fight against poverty and social exclusion or public health.

In previous elections the main political parties have hosted lead candidates during the campaigns, and they are expected to do the same for these elections. The PP will try to play host to Ursula von der Leyen, although her appointment will depend on the prime minister (from the PSOE). If Von der Leyen wishes to run for a second term with the support of the grand coalition, she will need the backing of the Spanish prime minister, who is one of the strongest socialist leaders in the European Union. In this regard, he may offer his support in exchange for an important portfolio for the Spanish commissioner and has already warned against the cooperation of Von der Leyen with radical right parties.

On the other hand, the Socialists' lead candidate, Luxembourg's Nicolas Schmit, will have a hard time featuring in Spain during the elections campaign as he is not well-known. *Sumar* and *Podemos*, who are competing for the electorate on the left of the socialists, could also use the lead candidates to gain visibility. However, the possibilities that lead candidates' appearances will change public opinion are limited: only 28% of Spaniards identify Ursula von der Leyen as the president of the European Commission.

Regardless of the topics and who shows up in the campaign, political parties will continue to use national issues that have been salient in the domestic

Even if European elections continue to be heavily influenced by what happens in the national arena and the domestic political debate still manages to overshadow the European one, the national political contest has slowly politicised European affairs. This means that Spaniards are becoming increasingly aware of European debates, as they are taking up greater space in the public debate in the media and national institutions.

agenda to agitate it. The European elections are seen as the next political contest in the partisan confrontation. It is worth noting that European debates that are dominating the discussions, such as enlargement or the war in Ukraine, remain absent from the campaign or merely a side issue.

European elections, national consequences?

According to the polls, the PP will come first, followed by the PSOE and Vox in second and third place, respectively. The PP will claim that these results are a sign of rejection of the current government on the part of public opinion. However, the possibility of second place for the PSOE in the European elections having deeper consequences for the national scenario depended on the previous regional elections: Galicia, the Basque Country and Catalonia. The fact that the PP was the clear winner only in Galicia, while the Socialists improved their results in the Basque Country and came first in the Catalan contest, reduces the potential consequences of the European elections in the national arena.

The biggest consequences may appear in the space of the radical left. The emergence of *Sumar* before the general elections in 2023 has not served as a unifying force for the radical left and there has been growing discontent among the small parties that make up this platform regarding the position of each party on the list for the European elections. Depending on how many seats *Sumar* wins, its role as unifier of the left may be undermined. And the wound could be more serious if *Podemos*, who used to dominate the radical left space, manages to obtain certain gains vis-à-vis *Sumar*. *Podemos* has presented the former minister for equality, who has a strong political profile, in a bid to regain ground at the expense of *Sumar*. In any case, both *Sumar* and *Podemos* are expected to obtain poor results as a consequence of their infighting, which is being punished by the discontent of their potential electorate. This power struggle and the comparative results may also have consequences for the Socialist party, which needs a partner to maintain a stable government and remain in power.

Greater awareness of the importance of European affairs, but not enough

Even if the PP comes in the first place, the consequences for the EU will be limited. Spain will continue to be an active member state, advocating for more integration and joint action. In fact, Prime Minister Sánchez has been a reliable partner of President Von der Leyen during the current political cycle. Therefore, after the European elections, the Spanish prime minister will participate in the negotiations over the top jobs both using national influence and balancing ideological and geographical features. The elections results will not matter so much.

Spain has regained a stronger position in the European debate after decades of [punching below its weight](#), as can be seen by its role in [the creation of the NextGenerationEU funds](#) or [securing the “Iberian exception” gas price cap](#). Without further elections scheduled after June 9th, the Spanish government will try to consolidate its influence in the European arena.

Finally, even if European elections continue to be heavily influenced by what happens in the national arena and the domestic political debate still manages to overshadow the European one, the national political contest has slowly politicised European affairs. This means that Spaniards are becoming increasingly aware of European debates, as they are taking up greater space in the public debate in the media and national institutions. The latest [Eurobarometer](#) poll shows that, compared with other Europeans, a high proportion of Spaniards understand that the international context makes voting more important and there has been a remarkable increase in the interest and importance that Spaniards assign to European elections. It is, however, still at a lower level than the European average.

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Although Law and Justice (PiS) received the most votes in the national election on October 15th, 2023, this did not translate into a parliamentary majority, and the three main opposition forces formed the government – the Civic Coalition (KO), the Third Way (TD) and the New Left (NL) – ending eight years of PiS and United Right (ZP) rule. This closed an important era in Polish politics. The two terms of PiS (affiliated with the European Conservatives and Reformists; ECR) were marked by conflicts regarding the breach of rule of law principles, numerous penalties for non-compliance with EU legislation, as well as the rulings of the Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU) (e.g. €1m per day in connection with disciplinary procedures in the judiciary) and high political polarisation.

Against this backdrop, the representatives of the new government – made up of parties allied with the major European political families¹ and led by former President of the European Council Donald Tusk – were very vocal about the need to improve relations with the EU institutions and claimed a greater agency in this regard compared to PiS. The ruling coalition was unanimous on ending the dispute over the rule of law by implementing the European Commission (EC) recommendations and the CJEU rulings. The commission and the council assessed the government's actions in the realm of the judiciary as sufficient to disburse payment under the union's recovery fund (Next Generation EU; NGEU).

Several (though mostly symbolic) pro-European actions have been taken, among others joining the European Public Prosecutor's Office. The governing coalition is also trying to revitalise cooperation within the Weimar Triangle: two meetings in this format have been held since the beginning of the year. It is worth noting, however, that on some high-profile issues, its stance is very close to that of its predecessor. This applies for instance to Ukrainian exports of agri-food products, reservations about institutional reform of the EU², [rejection of the Pact on Migration and Asylum](#), and opposition to the Nature Restoration Law.

1. In the European Parliament (EP), Civic Platform, the dominant party in KO, belongs to the European People's Party (EPP) group, as does the Polish People's Party (PSL), one of two partners in TD. Poland 2050, the other party from TD, is part of the Renew Europe group, while NL belongs to the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D). This gives the government more leverage in legislative works in the EP than was the case for the PiS government and ECR party.
2. It is worth noting that the introduction of Qualified Majority Voting in selected areas is not excluded by the current government.

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Campaign: themes and strategies

The European campaign started relatively late as parties only began to present their main ideas and candidates after local elections held on April 7th (with the second round of mayoral elections on April 21st).

Ruling coalition

Although in the 2019 European elections the parties of the ruling coalition (then in the opposition) ran together, this time they decided to stick to the winning formula of the 2023 national election, in which there were three separate lists.

Civic Coalition (KO) is positioning itself as a pro-European party that can still look after the interests of Polish citizens if those are in conflict with some European policies. The beginning of its campaign underscored the high international standing of Prime Minister Donald Tusk, its agency in unblocking the NGEU funds and its capacity to shape the EU position in other policy areas, particularly security. At a prominent economic conference in Poland, Tusk and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen spoke in unison about the necessity to boost support for Ukraine and develop greater defence industry capacity in Europe. KO will also attempt to present itself as a guarantor of the rule of law in Poland and draw attention to Law and Justice's close ties to the pro-Russian prime minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán.

Although KO generally supports the green transition, it tries to distance itself from its supposedly inordinate costs. The government has still to withdraw the lawsuits against certain aspects of the EU's climate policy filed at the CJEU by its predecessors. Additionally, the deputy minister for foreign affairs claimed that Poland is negotiating [opt-outs from some provisions of the Green Deal](#).

The two parties that form the Third Way (TD) have different electoral profiles: the Polish People's Party (PSL) is more traditional and appeals to voters from towns and the countryside, whereas Poland 2050 targets centrist metropolitan voters. TD successfully used this to its advantage by diversifying its communication depending on the target audience and the same is to be expected from the two parties during the campaign for the European Parliament (EP) elections. Their message regarding the EU consists of being Euro-realistic and the need for Europe to return to its roots. This is probably motivated by the party leaders' diagnosis of the social mood, in which a moderate narrative towards the EU will be the most advantageous. Being too pro-EU might be perceived as naïve and TD wants to present itself as the party that best knows how to win concessions from other members and EU institutions.

The Left is the most pro-European party sitting in the current parliament and it will emphasise its strong support for integration. The representatives of this party spoke out in favour of treaty changes and strongly supported the Green Deal. One of the first proposals unveiled during the election campaign was to start a discussion on the future constitution for Europe. It will hope that a more Euro-enthusiastic profile

will woo voters who are dissatisfied with the Civic Coalition's reticence about closer integration and its neglect of the policies to prevent climate change.

Opposition

Law and Justice (PiS) is likely to run a campaign focused on criticising the EU's record in recent years. Its main aim will be to fend off the challenge posed by the radical right, Eurosceptic Confederation party that will attempt to portray itself as the only genuine defender of Polish sovereignty against the EU. Polls show that only 17% of PiS supporters believe EU membership brings more benefits than losses; therefore the party can afford to be strongly critical of the EU establishment.³

Since losing power in December 2023, Law and Justice has been less restrained in voicing its disapproval of EU institutions. PiS leaders accused the EC of being biased on the issue of NGEU money and argued that the main reason for withholding the funds was to create favourable conditions for the then opposition parties to win the elections. The EP was lambasted as well: its plea for treaty change was depicted by numerous politicians of this party as an assault on the powers of member states. In addition to opposition to institutional changes (such as greater use of Qualified Majority Voting – QMV), the main thrust of the campaign will be the condemnation of measures adopted as part of the Green Deal. The project found itself in the limelight in relation to farmers' protests and PiS clearly believes that the spectre of green transition can mobilise voters in the countryside, where it enjoys strong backing.

While focusing on criticising EU actions, PiS will stay clear of calling for leaving the EU. It will attempt to pass itself off as constructive: willing and able to change the union, and even open to collaboration with parts of the mainstream forces, namely the EPP group (provided the latter reconsider their support for left-inspired projects). To further strengthen its respectability, PiS will emphasise that like-minded politicians are gaining ground in other member states.

Confederation inaugurated its campaign on April 15th, claiming its goal is to oppose “eurocrats' crazy ideas”. The green transition and migration policy feature prominently among them. Poland's most Eurosceptic party emphasises its opposition to regulations adopted within the framework of the Green Deal, such as the ban on combustion engine cars, and stresses that the green transition is largely to blame for EU's woes, including higher energy and food prices. The party strongly backed the farmers' protests, condemning not only the green regulations but also the influx of Ukrainian agricultural products. It also expressed an unambiguous opposition to Ukraine's membership of the EU.

Confederation will question Law and Justice's credentials as a Eurosceptic force and remind the electorate that it was Morawiecki's government that subscribed to climate neutrality, the Green Deal and the CAP reform that featured stronger environmental measures. They will also reiterate opposition to common debt and claim that paying off the loans taken out for NGEU will imply the introduction of “EU taxes”.

3. “Sondaż. Polacy o Unii: mniej entuzjazmu, więcej sceptycyzmu”, *Rzeczpospolita* (April 2nd, 2024).

However, the party will not bring up the idea of leaving the EU but claim its goal is to reform a flailing Union driven by misguided federalism.

Likely result and its impact

Regional elections of April 2024, won by Law and Justice, have shown stability of popular support for the political forces⁴ and their results suggest PiS can be considered the favourite. However, the Civic Coalition, which has topped most public opinion polls since February, could emerge as the winner due to advantageous circumstances that it enjoys in European elections. First, the pro-EU urban electorate is more willing to go out and vote, while mobilisation might be weaker in the PiS-friendly countryside. In addition, some conservative and Eurosceptic voters, who in national elections tactically support PiS as the strongest player, could vote for Confederation. Whatever the outcome of the race between Poland's two largest political forces, the pro-EU parties of the ruling coalition are on course to win a majority of seats.

Tusk's government, if fortified by a clear-cut victory over the Eurosceptic camp, could perhaps be somewhat more open to tackling delicate subjects such as the future of the green transition and institutional reforms. Yet more significant shifts in key policy areas are unlikely. With the presidential election of 2025 looming, the ruling coalition will be wary of being portrayed as "soft" in the EU arena by the opposition.

A victory for Civic Coalition would strengthen Tusk's credentials as a leader able to confront Eurosceptic forces and boost his international standing, especially given the fact that other pro-EU leaders of large member states (Emmanuel Macron, Pedro Sánchez and Olaf Scholz) have rather slim chances of a convincing electoral success. This would place him in a favourable position to make an impact in negotiations regarding EU top jobs and the division of portfolios within the new EC.

Conclusions

The European campaign will be short but quite vibrant. Several EU-related issues will feature prominently in inter-party discussions. The latter will focus on the EU's record in recent years, touching upon questions such as the feasibility of the green transition and the union's right to sanction member states because of failings related to the rule of law. The political forces that are critical of the current condition of the EU seem to have a clearer narrative. Yet mobilising Eurosceptic voters will be an uphill struggle. The parties of the pro-integration camp – with the exception of the Left – will be at pains to run a campaign that reconciles a positive attitude towards integration and European cooperation with opposition to some key initiatives of the outgoing commission. Even though the variety of attitudes towards integration present within the ruling coalition could lead to inconsistencies on some occasions and provoke internal frictions, it can also facilitate appealing to both more pragmatically-minded and more idealistic voters. Regardless of the result, the election is unlikely to provoke a significant shift in the Polish government's EU policy.

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4. Support for the Law and Justice stood at 35,4% in the national election of October 2023 and at 34,3% in the election to regional legislatures of April 2024. Other parties' respective results were: the Civic Coalition 30,7%/30,6%; the Third Way 14,4% /14,2%; the New Left 8,6%/6,3%; the Confederation 7,1%/7,2%. It is worth noting, however, that these results are not fully comparable due to the specificity of the local elections.

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What do the European Commission, Belgium’s federal government and the country’s regional governments all have in common? Their terms end at the same time. While holding the elections for the respective assemblies on the same day has a practical advantage, it reduces the capacity to identify which level of power is competent for which matter and, inevitably, weakens the democratic system. The European elections receive relatively little attention, in a country currently holding the Presidency of the Council of the EU.

Traditional parties in power facing a radical opposition

Since October 2020, Prime Minister Alexander De Croo has led a federal government made up of no fewer than seven parties from the four traditional political families: the liberals – Open VLD/MR (Renew); the socialists – Vooruit/PS (S&D); the Greens – Groen/Ecolo (Greens/EFA); and the Christian Democrats, on the Dutch-speaking side of the linguistic border only – CD&V (EPP). The opposition is therefore composed of the Flemish nationalist party (N-VA, which belongs to the ECR group and is currently the biggest party in the Chamber of Representatives); the radical right (Vlaams Belang; ID); and the radical left (PTB/PvdA; GUE/NGL), together with Les Engagés (EPP) – the French-speaking Christian Democrats – and DéFI (which has no representation in the European Parliament), in addition to two independent MPs.

The fact that, in October 2020, De Croo presented his government’s programme to the Chamber of Representatives in the Brussels hemicycle of the European Parliament, due to COVID-19 restrictions, was a subliminal message: his government presented itself as resolutely pro-European. The coalition agreement [mentioned Europe nearly 130 times](#). This comes as no surprise from a government composed of those political colours. Belgium, a founding member state heavily reliant on the internal market, must keep on pleading the case for (further) European integration.

Where, on the one hand, holding the presidency is an ideal opportunity to shed more light on what the EU does for the population, on the other, it is also occupying an important part of the space devoted to EU affairs in the media, paradoxically to the detriment of the campaign for the European elections.

In the Belgian federal structure, one should also look at the political dynamics within the regions, which play a prominent role in the Presidency of the Council of the EU, too, by chairing some formations of the council, a unique situation in comparison to other federal member states. An N-VA/CD&V/Open VLD coalition leads in Flanders; a PS/Ecolo/DéFI/Groen/Open VLD/Vooruit coalition is in charge in Brussels; and a PS/MR/Ecolo one runs Wallonia. Without commenting further on who is in the opposition at this level, let us at least note that at regional level too Vlaams Belang (in Flanders) and PTB/PvdA (in Flanders and Wallonia) sit in the opposition. Interestingly, Wallonia is one of the few regions in Europe without any radical right party. Migration is a topic barely discussed there. Like the federal government, the regional governments take a pro-European stance, but with distinctions.

An overshadowed European election campaign

On June 9th, 2024, the Belgians will head to the polls to cast their votes in three elections: regional, federal and European. Although Belgium finds itself at its most European moment since 2010, holding the Presidency of the Council for the 13th time, the European election is gaining the least traction of the three.

Where, on the one hand, holding the presidency is an ideal opportunity to shed more light on what the EU does for the population, on the other, it is also occupying an important part of the space devoted to EU affairs in the media, paradoxically to the detriment of the campaign for the European elections. In addition, the rotating presidency has the peculiarity of exposing the diversity of positions among all the levels of government of the country in relation to different EU issues. This situation has also been actively used by the radical right and radical left parties in their ongoing campaigns to mark their differences from the governing parties, notably for the former on migration, and for the latter on “the austerity measures dictated by Europe”.

While holding the elections for the respective assemblies on the same day has a practical advantage, it reduces the capacity to identify which level of power is competent for which matter. The risk of confusion (which also exists when the European election is organised on its own, as demonstrated in other contributions) is reinforced by campaigns where candidates at different levels meet and debate together, and feature on the same electoral leaflets. It is also compounded by the fact that many candidates (voluntarily or not) make proposals on topics that do not belong to the realm of competence of the level of power they are candidate for, or by candidates who currently sit in a different assembly than the one they are now running for. While we cannot assume that the results would be different were the European election organised on its own, this situation weakens the democratic system by not shedding sufficient light on each assembly where representatives sit, and by diluting the possible democratic and educative value of election campaigns.

Such a “mega election campaign” also pushes the political parties to make choices on where the money should be allocated as a matter of priority. As the parties do not perceive a possibility of significant power

gain in the European elections (Belgium is sending only 22 MEPs out of the 720), they tend to naturally prioritise the federal and regional ballots, as the results of those have an impact on whether they can join a government coalition; whereas the results of the European election do not even have a direct influence on which political party will get the position of European commissioner. For this very reason, it is also the federal and regional levels of power that will attract most of the media attention *after* the elections. In addition, candidates for the European Parliament make up a small minority of all candidates currently running for office, which makes them relatively less visible in the public space. When casting their vote, Belgians are likely to vote for the same political party in the European election as the one chosen for the two other elections, rather than the other way around. Therefore, the political parties allocate relatively fewer financial resources to the European election campaign – an attitude that somehow reflects how Belgians take the EU for granted, requiring no further effort, despite its crucial importance to the Belgian economy.

Traditional features, and one novelty

According to [the latest Eurobarometer](#), when asked how likely it is that they would vote in the European election if they were held “next week”, 75% of Belgians indicated that they were likely to vote, slightly above the EU average (71%). Taking into consideration that voting is mandatory in Belgium, this number is not that high. This can be explained by three main factors: (i) a lack of knowledge about the elections, (ii) a distrust of the political institutions and (iii) repeated *contra legem* announcements by major political figures that not voting would incur no fine. These announcements are worrying as they weaken the rule of law and, in turn, the strength of Belgian democracy and the trust in the institutions.

The constituencies for the three elections are different: at district level for the regional election, at provincial level for the federal election, and at community level for the European election. Belgium is one of four member states that do not have a nationwide constituency for the European ballot. Instead, it has three constituencies: one for the Flemish community, one for the French-speaking community and one for the German-speaking community. This makes the political space within which the campaign for the European election takes place even smaller than the size of the country, at a time when some in the EU are arguing in favour of an EU-wide constituency. Consequently, it is likely the analysis of the results of the upcoming European elections in Belgium will not allow one to draw conclusions on what the *Belgians* think, but rather on what the Dutch-speaking, French-speaking and German-speaking Belgians think, respectively. Political parties must inevitably opt for candidates who are well-known in their respective communities, and therefore choose well-established politicians or popular figures from other sectors (e.g. media, business or academia). Against this background, some names of lead candidates come as no surprise: the very popular Sophie Wilmès for MR (prime minister in 2019-2020, very visible during the COVID-19 pandemic), following Charles Michel’s unexpected withdrawal; Elio Di Rupo for PS (prime minister in 2011-2014 and, since 2019, minister-president of Wallonia for the second

While we cannot assume that the results would be different were the European election organised on its own, this situation weakens the democratic system by not shedding sufficient light on each assembly where representatives sit, and by diluting the possible democratic and educative value of election campaigns.

time), Johan Van Overtveldt for N-VA (minister of finance in 2014-2018 and current chair of the European Parliament Committee on Budgets); or Wouter Beke for CD&V (the party's president from 2010 to 2019). However, a certain change of guard is taking place. A career EU politician like Philippe Lamberts is leaving, but well-experienced national politicians are taking the reins of EU politics, further cementing the long-standing Belgian tradition of sending veteran politicians to the European Parliament, notable examples being Wilfried Martens and Guy Verhofstadt. In addition, the political parties use the popularity of those candidates to promote the candidates for the two other levels of power by, for instance, presenting them side by side on electoral leaflets, reinforcing the confusion mentioned previously.

For the very first time, Belgians aged 16 or 17 on June 9th, 2024, will have the right (and obligation) to vote in the European election. Belgium therefore is joining the small club of five member states that allow their citizens to vote from the age of 16 (Austria, Germany, Malta) or 17 (Greece). The European election, however, is the only election for which such a right has been introduced. This decision can be understood either as symbolising that the future of the next generations will be decided at the European level, or as demonstrating the relative lack of importance attached to the election by the authorities, choosing that one to try a new democratic experiment. [According to some projections](#), this decision will likely favour the Green and extreme parties.

Rise of the extremes

With relatively few seats to be allocated, and these being further divided among the different communities (NL 13; from 12 at the 2019 election/ FR 8 / DE 1) and a myriad of political parties, the European election has a [relatively high degree of predictability](#) within the Belgian political sphere. On the side of the Flemish community, Vlaams Belang (ID) will likely gain a fourth seat and PvdA/PTB (GUE/NGL), two seats – from 0 on this side of the linguistic border – at the expense of seats held by CD&V (EPP) and Open VLD (Renew) and thanks to the new seat allocated to Belgium. Switching to the French community, PTB/PvdA is likely to gain one additional seat at the cost of Ecolo (Greens/EFA). No change is expected when it comes to the German-speaking community. Such results would mean notably: (i) that 8 out of 22 MEPs elected in Belgium would come from the extremes; (ii) that the PS (S&D) would not be affected by the fact that its two current MEPs made headlines following the “Qatargate” scandal; and (iii) the arrival of 10 new Belgian faces in the hemicycle. This latest number is only slightly lower than for the entire hemicycle, which could see [up to 58% of new faces](#).

It would appear that the pro-EU stance of the current federal government will therefore not result in electoral gains in June 2024, an unfortunate final note to a so far successful Presidency of the Council.

ANTICIPATING THE CZECH EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS: AMBIGUOUS EU ATTITUDES, SOVEREIGNTY, SCEPTICISM ON GREEN POLICIES AND REFERENDUM ON THE GOVERNMENT

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The Czech government consists of a coalition between two electoral alliances formed before the 2021 parliamentary election. Differences in European Union (EU) positions among the parties making up the two alliances were evident.

The first alliance, *SPOLU* (Together), comprises three parties: the centre-right, liberal-conservative ODS (Civic Democratic Party); KSČM (Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People’s Party), a centre-right, Christian democratic party; and TOP 09, a centre-right party with a liberal orientation. The other alliance, *PirStan*, leans more centre-left and consists of the Pirates, a centre-left, progressive party, and STAN. All the parties generally hold pro-European views and support Czech membership of the EU. However, there are nuanced positions within the alliances. ODS, the senior government partner, is the most internally divided Czech party on EU integration. It has a strong Eurosceptic wing advocating for less political integration and a return to a focus on the internal market, resembling the pre-Maastricht era. Conversely, the Pirates and STAN hold the most pro-integration viewpoints, for example, advocating the extension of qualified majority voting to foreign and security policy. In essence, EU issues were expected to be a major challenge for the coalition due to their radically differing perspectives on the direction of European integration. The voice of the most senior coalition partner, ODS, prevailed in the current government’s programme priorities.

The other relevant parties ahead of the European Parliament (EP) elections are: ANO, which stands for “Action of Dissatisfied Citizens” and is often characterised as populist and centrist with an anti-corruption rhetoric; Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), a Eurosceptic radical right populist party and with a nationalist rhetoric and an anti-immigration stance; and *Trikolóra*, is a newly founded (2019) right-wing, socially conservative and Eurosceptic party.

The ballots and campaigns: are they Europeanised?

The campaign revolves around how it is necessary to stop the Green Deal-induced “green madness”, which may hurt the Czech economy and ordinary citizens. The Green Deal has been called “green madness” by politicians from both government and opposition parties.

These ideological differences regarding European integration will have an impact on the upcoming EP elections since the three parties forming the *SPOLU* alliance decided to run with a common list. The personal composition of their ballot was fraught with these ideological differences. Some potential candidates even considered not being included on the ballot due to ideological differences between them and other candidates. Ultimately, the *SPOLU* ballot is highly unambitious. Its main goals are to allow the three parties to draft a common list and to preserve the incumbent MEPs’ chances of getting re-elected. This means that no high-profile candidate, who could “jump ahead” due to preferential voting, other than the current MEPs, could make it onto the ballot, and some candidates were even withdrawn after the publication of the ballot. Overall, *SPOLU*’s ballot is incoherent regarding the candidates’ positions on EU issues.

Past EP elections in Czechia were highly nationalised and traditionally focused on domestic issues, despite an increased focus on Europe in the last EP election. The current campaign does not seem to break the rule of limited Europeanisation. The key issues, so far, are immigration, environment and security. All of these are relevant at the EU level. However, except for the latter issue, the political parties and candidates present these primarily from a domestic perspective. Their arguments concern how they will prevent more immigration into the EU or, for the more Eurosceptic ones, even how they will prevent the EU from bringing more immigrants into Czechia.

Similarly, the campaign revolves around how it is necessary to stop the Green Deal-induced “green madness”, which may hurt the Czech economy and ordinary citizens. The Green Deal has been called “green madness” by politicians from both government and opposition parties, but it is especially politicians from the opposition ANO and SPD¹ parties who use this expression. Both SPD and ANO, currently in the opposition at national level, portray themselves as key defenders of Czech interests in the EU. A critical issue for them is the protection of Czech sovereignty, which in practice means, for instance, the defence of unanimous decision-making. The transnational dimension is, by and large, lacking. The current campaign is nevertheless still more Europeanised than those of the first two elections after Czech EU accession.

In the campaign, political parties and candidates, with a few exceptions, do not highlight their activities at the EU level or their connections to EP party groups. The *SPOLU* coalition downplays this aspect as the three constituent parties sit in two different party groups. An exception to this silence on the transnational dimension is the Eurosceptic SPD, which promotes its transnational links with Matteo Salvini, Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders, as well as the ID group, on its billboards.

They promote their joint efforts to “stop the dictate of Brussels” and “halt immigration into the EU”. No political party projected to win seats in the EP elections includes European party logos in their manifestos. In exceptional cases, European party logos can be spotted on other campaign materials, such as billboards. Similarly,

1. Affiliated with the Identity and Democracy Group (ID) in the EP.

the relevant Czech political parties do not actively promote the lead candidates of their respective European party federations. In a nutshell, the activities of political parties conform to the second-order election logic in which party activity for EP elections is lower than for the first-order elections, and the campaign largely focuses on the domestic [dimension](#).

The situation on the media front is not significantly different. While one can notice that EP elections are approaching, the intensity of media reporting is low compared to the intensity ahead of parliamentary or even local elections. Media, in contrast to political parties and individual candidates, do a better job of providing a Europeanised angle to the coverage of EP elections. For certain issues, such as immigration and the environment, journalists highlight the need for Europe-wide cooperation and reflect, at times, the different interests of individual EU member states. However, we see limited vertical and horizontal Europeanisation. In other words, media rarely feature either EU-level political actors, including the lead candidates, or political actors from other EU member states.

An exception is the relatively higher salience of the European Commission and the debate about the formation of the new College of Commissioners following the EP elections. Nevertheless, this debate is primarily nationally oriented as it revolves around who will be the Czech nominee and how to ensure a strong portfolio for the candidate. Overall, media coverage of the EP elections can largely be considered from the perspective of [second-order coverage](#). The activities of media and political parties in EP elections seem to reflect the demands of Czech voters, who primarily ask MEPs to defend national interests.

Navigating national priorities: themes in the Czech EP election campaigns

As mentioned above, the campaigns revolve around several topics and policies, in line with the priorities and ideologies of the political parties. Overall, the campaigns seem to focus on how to defend national interests within the EU, with variations in the levels of consideration to the role that the EP has generally, i.e. addressing issues at the supranational level. The themes of the election campaigns revolve around security and sovereignty, environmental policies and the Green Deal, migration and integration and European identity, and cooperation to some extent.

Several parties, including [ANO](#), [SPD](#), and [Trikolóra](#), highlight national sovereignty and security as a priority. Specifically, there is a significant emphasis on illegal migration, the perceived threat of Islamisation and the importance of maintaining control over decision-making processes in national policies. [ANO's](#) platform demonstrates a commitment to stopping migration and preserving member states' sovereignty, utilising sentiments of protecting national identity and borders as a platform for success. [SPD](#) and [Trikolóra](#), seem to rely on refusing the Green Deal initiative, which they consider to be an infringement of national autonomy, to demonstrate their commitment to maintaining sovereignty extends to refusing initiatives such as the Green Deal.

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Environmental issues in general, and the European Green Deal in particular, are a common feature of the campaigns. *SPOLU* and the *Pirates* are likely to be in favour of sustainability and environmental protection, as they emphasise the importance of combating climate change and the transition towards a greener economy. *SPOLU*'s platform focuses on a "Green Europe for the People", which suggests they have a commitment to the environment as part of a broader economic prosperity agenda. Meanwhile, the *Pirates* are in support of a functional digital market and aim to introduce improvements to quality of life, while also taking into consideration the need for a comprehensive foreign policy that addresses environmental challenges.

A significant emphasis is placed on migration. Parties like ANO, SPD and *Trikolóra* demand stricter controls and measures as a tool for reducing illegal migration. Policies regarding migration are commonly linked to concerns over preserving cultural identity, and safeguarding national borders is portrayed as the top priority within these parties. However, the importance of diversity and inclusion is a topic that *SPOLU* and the *Pirates* advocate for, which is in line with broader debates around multiculturalism and integration in the EU.

While the discourse has a national-centric nature overall, there are also nods towards European identity and cooperation. *SPOLU*'s vision of a connected Europe through transport and information infrastructure, as well as its emphasis on a socially and culturally diverse Europe, suggests a recognition of the benefits of EU integration. Similarly, the *Pirates* focus on a strong foreign policy, which suggests that there is space to engage with global challenges on the international scene. However, these themes are often overshadowed by more immediate concerns about sovereignty, unanimity and national interests.

Deciphering the Czech EP elections: anticipated results and political dynamics

In predicting the likely results of the EP elections and the explanations for them, several factors come into play, including historical voting patterns, public opinion polls and the prevailing political climate. Overall, ANO is emerging as the likely winner of the election, given its projected lead in the polls. However, there are speculations that a predominantly pro-European voter turnout, coupled with potential coalition dynamics, could provide a boost to the *SPOLU* coalition. According to *IPSOS*, ANO is projected to lead with 26.3% of the vote, followed closely by the *SPOLU* coalition with 25.2%. STAN is expected to secure 12%, while the *Pirates* are anticipated to receive around 10%. Further down, the SPD and *Trikolóra* alliance is expected to garner 7.7%, with *KSČM* trailing at 6%.

Several factors could explain the expected success of ANO in the upcoming election. First, this is in line with the pattern from previous EP elections, suggesting that governing parties are likely to face declining support. This is also in step with previous research which has suggested that voters tend to use the EP elections as a sort of appraisal of their national governments. Moreover, ANO's rhetoric, which seems to have adapted to reflect the mood of the population to maintain voters'

support, has somewhat shifted to resemble that of the far-right SPD and could be attractive to Eurosceptic voters. However, the role turnout plays is also to be kept in mind as this cannot be always precisely predicted.

When it comes to party group affiliations, it is likely that strategic considerations and ideological alignments will shape what happens after the election. For example, the Pirates' Markéta Gregorová pointed out that their choice of faction will depend on the support that they may gain from different groups to pursue their interests, which places the Greens or Renew in the state of play. STAN's association with the EPP could potentially move towards Renew, especially if differences in ideologies prompt Renew to exclude ANO. ANO's group affiliation is also subject to speculations ranging from the ECR to Renew. In summary, ANO, due to its ability to shift across the political landscape, is likely to be successful, but potential changes in affiliations could also affect the dynamics within the EP.

What consequences for Czech domestic politics and the EU?

The upcoming EP elections are primarily understood as a litmus test for the next parliamentary elections scheduled for autumn 2025 and a referendum on the current government. This again attests to the second-order election logic of Czech EP elections, as they are perceived as a kind of prelude to elections that "really" matter. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that they will have any significant effect on the composition or stability of the current coalition government or significantly alter government-opposition dynamics. If parties currently without representation in the national parliament win seats in the EP elections, it may give them momentum ahead of next year's parliamentary contests.

Given the existing ambiguity of attitudes of the government parties towards the EU, one should not anticipate any significant changes to Czech EU politics following the EP elections. Their results will likely showcase popular support for parties sceptical of extensive policies in favour of environmental protection and tackling climate change. It is thus probable that this perspective will prevail in Czechia after the EP elections and will also be reflected in the work of Czech MEPs. A departure from the original EU-wide plans of green transformation is expected among Czech MEPs.

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Prime Minister (PM) Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party has been in power for 14 years, winning a supermajority in every election since 2010. The ruling party's power is based on its hegemonic position politically, legally, institutionally, financially and publicly, including a constitutional majority, a [tailor-made electoral system](#), [state capture](#), and [control of public discourse](#), making its rule so far unchallengeable domestically. Thus, national elections have minor stakes for Fidesz, turning the regime's attention to its international environment and making it the main playing field. The [overarching goal](#) of PM Orbán is to bring about a "regime change" in the European Union (EU) by dismantling the dominance of the current mainstream elites and shifting the EU towards a "Europe of Nations" to create a favourable external environment for his regime's long-term domestic persistence.

Having a large presence in the European Parliament (EP) plays a part in this effort. Out of the 21 seats assigned to Hungary, Fidesz has the largest delegation in the current EP, with 12 MEPs, and one MEP from its satellite Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP). While Fidesz's MEPs have been non-attached since the party was forced to leave the centre-right European People's Party (EPP) in 2021, KDNP's sole MEP managed to remain in the EPP group. To strengthen its position, the Orbán regime has been [building influence](#) across the West, forming alliances and partnerships with like-minded "sovereignist" parties in almost every EU member state, based on the similarities in ideology, policy or interests.

Based on these relationships, Fidesz wants to build the broadest possible coalition of radical right and populist radical right parties, currently spread between the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and Identity and Democracy (ID) political groups in the EP, with a view to securing more influence in the EU. However, a united group seems unlikely to materialise, as these parties differ over several key issues, prominently the war in Ukraine. Even Fidesz [admitted](#) this by [signalling](#) its desire to join the ECR to somewhat ease its isolation in autumn 2023.

The “anti-Brussels” rhetoric has been a prominent feature of the Orbán regime’s permanent campaigning over the past decade and was supposed to be central to Fidesz’s agenda for the 2024 EP elections.

What the campaign was supposed to be about

Although the official campaign for the European Parliament and local elections in Hungary only began on April 20th, this made little difference, as the ruling Fidesz party has kept the country in a state of permanent political campaigning for the past 14 years. The reason for this is that, besides the legal and institutional framework, Fidesz’s power **relies** heavily on the manipulation of information, and the formulation of internal and external enemies to shift the blame and incite and exploit anger and fear. Using hostile **disinformation narratives** based on the Kremlin’s playbook, Fidesz portrays independent domestic actors such as the free press, NGOs, think tanks, academics, and opposition politicians as foreign agents that are funded by Western globalist elites (e.g. George Soros) to drag Hungary into the war in Ukraine, open the borders to illegal immigrants and poison children’s minds with gender propaganda. Fidesz also planned to focus on these messages in the current campaign, wrapped in a **Eurosceptic** sovereigntist “grand” narrative.

The “anti-Brussels” rhetoric has been a prominent feature of the Orbán regime’s permanent campaigning over the past decade and was supposed to be **central to Fidesz’s agenda** for the 2024 EP elections. Fidesz claims that Hungary’s sovereignty is being threatened by the EU, which it portrays as an “empire” and compares to the Soviet Union. Another **key narrative** is that “European leftist pro-war politicians”, such as Ursula von der Leyen, Manfred Weber or Emmanuel Macron, want to start “World War III” by sending weapons and soldiers to Ukraine, while “conservative”, “sovereigntist” forces, **led by Fidesz**, want to end the war and advocate alone **for a ceasefire** and peace talks. According to Fidesz’s message, **this year’s EP elections** are about sovereigntist forces fighting against globalist elites to **occupy Brussels** in order to return the West to “normality”, end the war in Ukraine, save farmers and the economy, stop migration and protect families and children from re-education.

How the campaign has gone off the rails for both Fidesz and the opposition

Despite the government’s **dominant position** in the public arena, Fidesz’s pre-planned Eurosceptic election campaign was washed away by two major scandals that have **rocked** the government since February.

The first was the so-called “**presidential pardon scandal**”, which shook a **fundamental element** of the **regime’s identity**, the protection of children, and forced the resignation of President Katalin Novák and former Justice Minister Judit Varga, MP, for pardoning a person with close ties to the regime’s highest circles who had been convicted of covering up a child sexual abuse case. Varga was replaced by the much less popular MEP Tamás Deutsch as the lead candidate of Fidesz’s EP list.

The scandal seemed to end by late February, but then a **new player emerged**. The ex-husband of former Justice Minister Varga, Péter Magyar stepped into the limelight and accused the regime’s second most influential person, Cabinet Minister Antal Rogán, of serious

abuse of power. Using his image as a regime insider, Magyar captured the attention of [voters dissatisfied](#) with established opposition parties and launched a new movement and then a party (TISZA) to run in the elections. Leading TISZA's EP list, Magyar [campaigns against](#) further European integration, criticising especially the EU's rule of law mechanism. Nevertheless, his TISZA party seeks membership of the EPP if elected.

Despite Fidesz's massive counter-campaign to discredit Magyar both personally and politically, the ruling party has been on the defensive since early February, unable to take control of the political agenda and focus on its pre-planned "occupy Brussels" campaign.

However, Magyar's sudden rise has not only disrupted Fidesz's plans, but also those of the highly fragmented opposition parties. Capitalising on the dissatisfaction with the democratic opposition parties that [cooperated in the 2022 national elections](#), Magyar's TISZA party has mainly attracted voters from them and from undecided voters who could have been a reserve for both the opposition and Fidesz. Thus, within a few weeks, the TISZA party became the largest opposition party and completely restructured the opposition landscape. Parties that were previously seen as possible relative winners in the EP elections are now fighting for relevance, and some even for seats.

The situation of the democratic opposition is complicated by the fact that it is pursuing two different strategies for the [two elections](#) taking place on June 9th. For the EP elections, their main goal is to clarify the power hierarchy among them in preparation for the 2026 parliamentary elections, so they are competing against one another rather than against Fidesz. In the local elections, however, they (would have had to) field joint or coordinated candidates to compete with Fidesz. This has complicated negotiations between them, increased dissatisfaction and created confusion among voters, which was precisely Fidesz's intention in holding the two elections on the same day.

The former largest opposition party, the Democratic Coalition (DK; S&D group), is leading a joint three-party list led by MEP Klára Dobrev and including the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) and Budapest mayor Gergely Karácsony's party, Dialogue (*Párbeszéd*). Their [campaign](#) is focused on opposing PM Orbán, aiming to topple the regime with a snap election if the EP elections see Fidesz's support fall. The liberal Momentum party (Renew Europe) is fielding a separate EP list, led by MEP and party leader, Anna Donáth. Their main campaign messages have so far focused on "[being the most active Hungarian party in the EP](#)" and getting [direct EU funding](#) to Hungarian civil society and municipalities, despite the rule of law deficiencies in Hungary. The former extreme right, now mainstream right-wing *Jobbik* party will likely lose its only MEP.

Apart from them, two parties will have some chance to gain mandates in the EP: The extreme-right Our Homeland (*Mi Hazánk*), and the anti-establishment, extra-parliamentary Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party (MKKP). *Mi Hazánk's* leading candidate is MP and party leader László Toroczkai, who aims to join the Identity and Democracy (ID) group if elected to the EP. Based on a wide range of conspiracy theories, the

Hungary is in political turmoil ahead of the European and local elections on June 9th, making it difficult to predict the outcome of the EP elections. However, Fidesz is still by far the strongest party.

party [campaigns](#) against further European integration in order to protect Hungary from the “anti-national ideological interest network of Brussels”. MKKP’s [campaign](#) focuses on anti-corruption and improving citizens’ participation in EU politics, while promising to redistribute funds for its MEPs to local community projects in Hungary. MKKP’s leading candidate is Marietta Le, an expert on civic participation, who could join the Greens/EFA group if elected.

Potential results of the elections

Hungary is in political turmoil ahead of the European and local elections on June 9th. Since February, the Orbán government has been hit by the biggest political scandals of the last decade and a new player is shaking up the political field. These developments have completely reset the election campaign, revived national politics and overshadowed Fidesz’s anti-Brussels messages. As the political situation is highly volatile, and opinion poll results vary widely, it remains difficult to predict the outcome of the EP elections.

Although Fidesz’s support has declined since June 2022, especially since the presidential pardon scandal in February, it is still by far the strongest party, with the support of 42% of those willing to vote with a [party preference](#). Thus, the default scenario is that Fidesz will get the majority of Hungary’s 21 seats, and the opposition will remain in a state of disarray, unable to cooperate effectively. This could solidify Fidesz’s hegemony in the Hungarian political sphere, cooling down the almost revolutionary sentiments among some voters.

Alternatively, Fidesz could fall below 40% and lose the majority of Hungary’s EP seats, leading to a revival and reshaping of the opposition, especially if TISZA fares well. The uncertainty is in the prospect of Péter Magyar’s movement and its ability to institutionalise. It will likely prove difficult for his movement to build a national network of politicians and activists while keeping up the revolutionary mood and retaining the public’s attention until the 2026 general elections.

Hegemon in Hungary, isolated in Europe

On the European stage, Hungary’s stance will remain unchanged. The Orbán regime will aim to ease its international isolation and improve its room for manoeuvre. To achieve this, Fidesz will try to join the [ECR group](#) or form [a larger radical-right group](#) on the basis of the ECR and ID, while its satellite party, the KDNP, will remain hidden in the EPP. If Fidesz were to join the ECR without the departure of parties that have expressed their opposition, such as the Sweden Democrats, the Finns Party, the Latvian National Alliance, the Belgian New Flemish Alliance, the Czech Civic Democratic Party and the Slovak Freedom and Solidarity, it could make the group [the third largest](#) in the EP. This certainly gives ECR leader Giorgia Meloni a strong motivation to support Fidesz’s entry into the group, which is also favoured by the group’s second largest delegation, Poland’s Law and Justice party. Whether the internal opposition can be overcome will probably depend on Fidesz’s concessions regarding its pro-Kremlin and anti-Ukraine stance,

other possible inter-group movements, and the overall outcome of the elections. Membership of the ECR group could then further moderate Fidesz's current pro-Kremlin and anti-Ukraine rhetoric to conform to the group's stance.

The Orbán regime might hope to regain some goodwill in Europe during Hungary's EU Council presidency in the second half of 2024. The Orbán government will aim for a smooth, non-controversial, and technocratic presidency while using the symbolic power of the presidency to promote its views and advance the messages of the anti-establishment and sovereigntist forces. Nevertheless, if the current power relations prevail, Hungary will likely continue drifting towards and remaining on the EU's periphery, becoming a pariah state within the EU without major strategic allies. This is why Viktor Orbán will be closely watching the Austrian parliamentary elections and the German regional elections in the autumn, hoping that more of his allies will join national governments or reshape domestic politics. And that is why PM Orbán is banking on Donald Trump's return to the US presidency, which could give another big boost to European sovereigntist forces.

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The upcoming European elections in Austria will take place against the backdrop of the end of a five-year governmental period of the conservatives and Greens, and a visible upswing of right-wing Eurosceptic forces. The conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP/EPP) and The Greens (Die Grünen/EFA) have formed a coalition government since January 1st, 2020. Both political parties generally support EU-integration, although they hold different views in specific areas, e.g. asylum and migration, climate protection, transport or the social dimension. However, both parties have agreed in condemning Russia's war against Ukraine and expressed their solidarity with Kyiv. Since Austria is a militarily neutral country, they have pledged to provide financial and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine. Nevertheless, to reach a consensus has been a constant uphill battle for both political parties because their core values differ. While the Greens are more pronounced in areas such as the EU taxonomy, free trade like the Mercosur agreement, energy and climate, as well as social and migration issues, the core values of the ÖVP are performance culture, prosperity together with social security, as well as international competitiveness. In addition, the party emphasises the maintenance of internal and external security, defensible democracy, reliable armed forces, protection against crime and controlled legal immigration.

The ÖVP opposed the end of internal combustion engine cars as of 2035, arguing for technology neutrality. As regards the Schengen expansion to Romania and Bulgaria, the conservatives insisted on Austria's veto because of perceived illegal migrant movements and a lack of border control. After months of European pressure on the ÖVP, the government finally agreed to cease (as of March 31st, 2024) the checks on Romanian and Bulgarian citizens at EU internal air and maritime borders ("Schengen Air"). Nor do they support the abolition of unanimity on the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy, although this is part of the European People's Party (EPP) electoral manifesto and the Austrian coalition agreement mentions the need to push for the extension of qualified majority voting, e.g. on foreign policy.

The upcoming national elections in the autumn dominate the current EU election battle. In the domestic debate, the EU has often been portrayed as a scapegoat and antagonist while the transnational dimension and highlighting the Union's added value are often missing.

On the European stage, the ÖVP does not always follow the positions of its European family, the EPP, while it is interesting to note that Othmar Karas, one of the most established MEPs and the first vice-president of the European Parliament (EP), does not always follow his own party line in his voting behaviour. Due to these ever-increasing differences, in October 2023 Karas announced that he would not be standing for the new European Parliament.

In contrast to the ÖVP, the Austrian Greens to a large extent follow the line of their European party family.

Austrian public perception

As the [EP Spring Eurobarometer](#) survey shows, the future of Europe, migration and asylum, action against climate change, support for the economy and the creation of new jobs, as well the fight against poverty and social exclusion, are the most important topics for EU citizens and should be discussed during the upcoming EP election campaign.

In Austria, trust in domestic politics has eroded in recent years. Various corruption scandals have contributed to this. In addition, there is a high level of frustration with the work of the government over the last few (crisis) years (e.g. regarding high inflation and the increase in the cost of living, after-effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, sustainability of the social system and health care financing, and migration).

The public perception that these problems are not being adequately addressed benefits the opposition and the Eurosceptic and radical right Freedom Party (FPÖ/ID) in particular. It is consistently leading in the polls for both the EU and national elections.

These challenges and the upcoming national elections in the autumn also dominate the current EU election battle. In the domestic debate, the EU has often been portrayed as a scapegoat and antagonist while the transnational dimension and highlighting the Union's added value are often missing.

As regards the Austrian media, outside election periods it is rare to find extensive coverage of European topics and decisions made on the European stage. Moreover, tabloid media, with a strong role in the public sphere, tend to take quite a Eurosceptic stance. The European elections – long regarded as a secondary issue – will likely boost coverage and background reporting. But we can expect a high number of TV debates featuring the lead candidates – both by Austria's public service broadcaster ORF as well as their private competitors – or special topical supplements in quality newspapers.

The parties and their elections campaigns

Since the beginning of April, the political parties have been slowly rolling out their European election campaigns and started with the promotion of their top candidates. Beside the five parties represented in the Austrian parliament and the European Parliament, two other lists managed to collect enough signatures to feature on the ballot paper.

In their election campaigns, the parties focus on the following topics:

The ÖVP/EPP, with their lead candidate Reinhard Lopatka, calls for “more Europe” in terms of the internal market. At the same time, the party wants “a better Europe” in the fight against illegal migration, regarding more robust external border protection with asylum procedures exclusively at the external borders or in third countries; and it enters the fight against overregulation and backs more subsidiarity. Though these topics are similarly addressed by the FPÖ, the ÖVP is striving to show that its stance is constructive and pro-European. The conservatives also call for the provision of more funds to “strengthen security and defence readiness” and “economical budgeting”, and support further EU enlargement and solidarity with Ukraine.

The Social Democrats (SPÖ/S&D) with their lead candidate, Andreas Schieder, are committed to a social and fair Europe and warn of an imminent shift to the right. Other core areas of their campaign include social security, free trade agreements only with high social and environmental standards, the creation of safe and legal channels for migration, initiatives against disproportionate power of global companies, the supply chain act, a stronger focus on social issues and social cohesion, and fair taxation, as well as support for the Green Deal and solidarity with Ukraine. SPÖ lead candidate Schieder calls for a “Europe first” agreement instead of “Made in China” to boost Europe’s reindustrialisation, which includes protectionist measures. On its billboards, the SPÖ also promotes “peace and freedom”.

The FPÖ/ID, with lead candidate Harald Vilimsky, is in favour of radically downsizing the EU, stopping the “process of centralisation” and reversing it by returning competences to the member states. Moreover, direct democracy should take precedence over EU law, asylum abuse and illegal migration should be fought more effectively and sanctions against Russia need to be opposed. The first series of FPÖ billboards were rendered in black and white presenting the slogan “Stop EU madness” and depicted European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky hugging each other. There are also illustrations and the keywords “asylum crisis”, “warmongering”, “corona chaos” and “eco-communism”. Interestingly, in this first part of its campaign, lead candidate Vilimsky did not feature on the billboards whereas in the second phase he is portrayed as “Patriotic – what else?”, with the additional keywords “free – safe – neutral”.

The Greens (Grüne/EFA), with their young, female lead candidate Lena Schilling, stand for combatting climate change, showing solidarity with Ukraine, securing a more democratic Europe, fighting right-wing extremism, and pro-feminism. Moreover, their campaign includes youth participation rights, zero tolerance of corruption, enforcement of a price cap on train tickets with a maximum of 10 cents per kilometre, EU world leadership in green technology and affordable medicine throughout Europe. On the billboards Schilling who comes from a climate activist background but has announced to become a member of the Greens is prominently featured with the slogans “More heart than hate”, “Climate needs heart” and “Europe needs heart”. In the course of the election campaign Schilling has been confronted with allegations questioning her credibility casting a shadow on the Greens’ election prospects.

The upswing of Austria's Eurosceptics would further exacerbate the already highly polarised and emotional domestic EU debate and foster a voting trend for the national parliamentary elections in September 2024 that could lead to a government with a more reserved stance on EU integration.

The election manifesto of the liberal NEOS/Renew Europe, with their lead candidate Helmut Brandstätter, includes the creation of a United States of Europe with a common foreign, security and defence policy and an EU army; solidarity with Ukraine; abolition of the principle of unanimity; deregulation of the internal market and strengthening EU industries; reforming the asylum system and the establishment of clear standards for due process and humane reception; more enlargement; and a European right to education as a fifth fundamental freedom in the EU. In its first wave of billboards, NEOS decided against including its lead candidate but instead posed questions like "What protects against Trump?" and "What stops Putin?", with the faces of the two leaders mentioned featuring prominently.

Interestingly, all parties declined to display their European family logo on their promotional material.

Regarding the two outsiders not yet represented in the Austrian parliament or European Parliament, they will have to fight hard to pass the 4% threshold required to secure representation on the European stage for the next five years:

The Communist Party/KPÖ is fielding Günther Hopfgartner for the upcoming EU elections. Last time, as in all previous EU elections, the KPÖ failed to win a seat in the European Parliament, with 0.65% of the vote, but this time its prospects could be much better. According to the KPÖ, the European Parliament needs a force that can be relied upon to stand up for housing and social issues, for neutrality and for peace. In this regard, it is also worth noting that Walter Baier, an Austrian, will be the top candidate of the European Left in the EP elections. However, this fact has played no part (yet) in the current election debate or in the KPÖ campaign itself.

The entry into the EP election battle of the relatively unknown list DNA (Democratic-Neutral-Authentic), with its lead candidate Maria Hubmer-Mogg, comes as a surprise. The party opposes the former COVID-19 measures, demanding an "independent investigation into the COVID-19 policy" and calls for the rejection of the WHO's planned pandemic treaty. The DNA demands an "immediate end to sanctions against Russia" and the start of peace negotiations and wants an "end to EU corruption". If the DNA managed to pass the threshold to gain a seat in the upcoming EU parliament it is not clear which European party, if any, it would join.

The likely results of the EP elections in Austria

According to [recent polls](#) (April 22nd-24th, 2024), the FPÖ would make significant gains with 27% of the votes (+9.8 percentage points compared to the result of 2019). The other winning parties would be the NEOS with 13% (+4.6) and the KPÖ with 3% (+2.2). Those suffering losses would mainly include the ÖVP with a predicted 20% (-14.6), and the Greens, with 12% (-2.1) while the social democrats would remain stable with 24%.

What is new and noteworthy is that the Eurosceptic FPÖ could substantially motivate its voters to go to the polls and could end up in first place for the first time in the history of European elections in Austria. With public dissatisfaction running high, smaller parties are also

gaining ground. However, at the end of the day it is all about mobilising supporters. The election campaigns have just started and there is still a long way to go to translate the opinion polls into actual election results.

Be that as it may, the European elections are unlikely to change Austria's general approach to European integration. Even if the Freedom Party makes considerable gains, a large majority among Austrian MEPs will still be from pro-EU parties. Nevertheless, the upswing of Austria's Eurosceptics would further exacerbate the already highly polarised and emotional domestic EU debate and foster a voting trend for the national parliamentary elections in September 2024 that could lead to a government with a more reserved stance on EU integration.

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Finland has traditionally been characterised by a broad national consensus on foreign and security policy. This also comprises European Union (EU) policy, which is mostly perceived from a diplomatic rather than a party-political perspective. The cross-party consensus includes, among other things, a high regard for the EU's common foreign, security and defence policy, a positive attitude to the single market, a strict adherence to the rule of law, and a desire not to be relegated to a "second tier" of differentiated integration. At the same time, Finnish parties are generally "frugal" when it comes to the EU budget and mostly sceptical of Euro-federalist symbolism.

The dominant foreign policy perspective also implies that the EU is rarely perceived by the Finnish public as an arena for democratic party politics, which is largely confined to the national level. While Finns have a relatively high level of trust in the EU, Finland is among the few member states where [trust in national democratic institutions is even higher](#). In general, the focus of the European policy debate in Finland is less on different views of the common supranational interest than on the benefits of the EU for Finland's own national interest. When Finnish opposition parties (of various political orientations) attack the government on EU issues, this is usually based on a perceived lack of effectiveness rather than policy substance.

The cross-party consensus on EU policy is not complete, however. On the pro-European side, the business-friendly National Coalition Party (NCP), affiliated with European People's Party (EPP) political group in the European Parliament (EP), stands out as an advocate of open markets and economic integration. Also decidedly pro-European is the Swedish People's Party (SPP/ALDE), which represents the interests of the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland. On the Eurosceptic side, the Finns Party, affiliated with European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) in the EP, made its mark during the euro crisis as a fierce opponent of transnational financial transfers and has since flirted with the idea of Finland leaving the EU (Iso-Markku and Stewart, 2024).

The current Finnish government under Petteri Orpo (NCP) unites both of these extremes. It consists of four parties – NCP, Finns, SPP and the small Christian Democrats (EPP) – that are held together mainly by an agenda of fiscal austerity and labour-market liberalisation. On EU policy,

The Finnish see “the EU’s defence and security” as one of the most important issues of the elections. The broad Finnish consensus means that the fundamental direction of the EU’s foreign and security policy will hardly be up for debate in the campaign. By contrast, economic and fiscal policy offers much greater potential for controversy.

the [government programme](#) is a compromise based on traditional Finnish positions: it wants Finland to be an “active, reliable and solution-oriented member state”, but also highlights that “Finland’s national interests must be identified and safeguarded in decision-making”. The three official EU policy priorities are “strategic competitiveness”, “clean and digital transformation”, and “comprehensive security”. On the latter, Prime Minister Orpo has launched the idea of a “preparedness union”, presenting Finland as an example to other EU member states.¹

Meanwhile, the centre-left opposition – the Social Democratic Party (SDP), affiliated with the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) in the EP; the Greens, with the European Green Party (EGP); and the Left Alliance (EL) – has recently positioned itself as more integration-friendly than the government, [especially in fiscal and environmental matters](#) (Raunio, 2024). Still, supranational democracy as such is a priority only for the Greens, which is traditionally also the party most open to transnational fiscal solidarity. The fourth major opposition party, the Centre, affiliated with the Renew Europe (liberals) EU group, is traditionally cautious about European integration, accepting the status quo but opposing further deepening in most areas except security policy.

Campaign topics

EU election campaigns in Finland are usually short. In early May, the parties had only recently adopted their manifestos and nominated their candidates, and the media were only beginning to pay attention to the upcoming elections. After the national parliamentary elections in April 2023 and presidential elections in January/February 2024, a certain election fatigue could be expected from Finnish citizens. Nevertheless, [opinion polls](#) in the spring of 2024 showed that early interest in the EU elections was actually [higher than usual](#).

At the national level, the Finnish debate in early 2024 was unusually polarised, marked by a wave of political strikes against the government’s planned spending cuts and restrictions on trade union rights. In this context, the EU has sometimes served as an external reference point: for example, [the government has justified](#) its measures as necessary to avoid an excessive deficit procedure against Finland². However, the debate is essentially seen as a domestic issue and has not been linked to the European elections as such.

Before the election campaign, both national [politicians and expert commentators](#) expected security policy, the economy and climate protection to become the election’s main issues. This is mostly in line with the Spring 2024 Eurobarometer, according to which 55% of the Finnish respondents see “the EU’s defence and security” as one of the most important issues of the elections – [almost twice the EU average](#) (31%). Despite this considerable interest, the broad Finnish consensus on these matters means that the fundamental direction of the EU’s foreign and security policy will hardly be up for debate in the campaign. By contrast, economic and fiscal policy offers much greater potential for controversy: while the government opposes any new EU financial instruments, [the SDP supports a supranational investment](#) fund financed by new EU own resources to prevent state aid races between member states.

1. Petteri Orpo’s speech in the European Parliament, 13 March 2024.

2. *Yle News*. “Finland plans ‘difficult but necessary’ spending cuts and tax rises” (16.04.2024)

Regarding climate policy, the main bone of contention is its impact on the forestry industry, which plays a similar political role in Finland to agriculture in other countries. While climate policy is one of the EU issues that Finns are most interested in, the parties with a strong rural voter base – the Finns Party and the Centre – as well as the pro-business NCP criticise it for being too restrictive on forestry. In March 2024, [the Finnish government helped](#) to block the EU Nature Restoration Law in the Council, for which it was praised by the Centre and condemned by SDP, Greens and the Left Alliance.

Finally, many [Finnish media also report](#) on the rise of the European radical right as a key aspect of the European elections. In this context, radical right parties in other member states are often portrayed as a threat to democracy and the rule of law, and especially to the EU's unity in the face of Russian aggression. In contrast, Finland's own far-right party, the Finns Party, has caused relatively little controversy in recent months. After a racism scandal in the summer of 2023 died down, the party discreetly aligned itself with the government's prioritisation of fiscal and economic policy. This has led to a certain normalisation in public perception, which is also facilitated by the NCP. For example, when centre-left MEPs criticised Prime Minister Orpo in March 2024 for cooperating with the radical right, he replied that "there are no far-right parties in my government". In an editorial, Finland's leading newspaper [Helsingin Sanomat described](#) this as characteristic of how national and European views of a country's politics can diverge.

While the Finns Party had campaigned on leaving the EU in the 2019 European elections, it has since downplayed this goal – partly because support for EU membership in Finland has reached record highs following Russia's war on Ukraine, and partly because the party's leadership does not want to cast doubt on its ability to participate in an NCP-led government. In its [2024 manifesto](#), the party claims that EU withdrawal "should not be treated as a taboo" although "it is not realistic for Finland to unilaterally leave the EU in the near future".

Candidates

Finland has an open and unranked party-list electoral system, in which voters cast their vote for a specific candidate. Individual personalities therefore always play a central role in election campaigns. In 2024, this is exacerbated by the fact that an unusually large number of incumbent Finnish MEPs are retiring and will not be standing again in the election, leaving many voters to find a new preferred candidate. As a result, media reports often focus on the [presentation of the candidates from Finland](#), which include many personalities with a high national profile, such as several former or outgoing party leaders as well as former ministers from the 2019-23 centre-left government. However, most of these high-profile candidates have made their names in national politics and are not primarily known for their positions on EU policy.

Meanwhile, the supranational European parties and their lead candidates are almost completely absent from the Finnish debate. After speculation in early 2023 that [then Prime Minister Sanna Marin](#) might run as the PES's lead candidate failed to materialise, the Finnish media lost track

The widespread view of the EU as an element of foreign and security policy, rather than an arena for party politics, has traditionally limited the political salience of European elections in Finland. In 2024, an emerging left-right divide on the EU's fiscal and climate policies may begin to change this.

of the process. While EPP candidate Ursula von der Leyen is of course well known as the current commission president, PES candidate Nicolas Schmit has no media presence at all. Even when Schmit visited an SDP event in Helsinki shortly after his nomination as lead candidate, the only newspaper to pick up on this was the SDP's own [party organ *Demokraatti*](#).

Likely results

Since 2004, Finnish voter turnout in European elections has usually been around 40% – below the EU average and far below the turnout in Finnish national elections. However, there are significant differences in the parties' voter mobilisation. Parties with a clearly pro-European reputation, especially the NCP and the SPP, tend to do well, while the SDP and the Finns Party have often underperformed in comparison with their national results. As a result, the NCP has won the most seats in all Finnish EU elections since 1999.

Opinion polls in spring 2024 seem to confirm this pattern. While the SDP narrowly leads the NCP in general national opinion polls, the latter comes first when voters are asked specifically about the EU elections. However, if overall turnout increases, as early interest polls suggest, the mobilisation gap could narrow and the NCP's advantage could be reduced.

Compared to 2019, only minor changes in the seat distribution are expected. The NCP, the SDP and the Left can hope to gain one seat, while the Greens – who did exceptionally well in 2019 – would lose one. For the SPP, which is suffering from its electorate's dissatisfaction with the current government, its only seat in the European Parliament could be in jeopardy.

The widespread view of the EU as an element of foreign and security policy, rather than an arena for party politics, has traditionally limited the political salience of European elections in Finland. In 2024, an emerging left-right divide on the EU's fiscal and climate policies may begin to change this.

Still, given the low level of media interest and the expected relative stability of the results, the elections are unlikely to have a major impact on Finnish politics or policy. The main effect is likely to be the high turnover of candidates, which will lead to many new Finnish faces in the next European Parliament.

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The current Government of Ireland – the 34th in the state’s history – took office on April 9th, 2024, following the shock resignation in March of Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Leo Varadkar. Holding back tears, Varadkar insisted that his reasons for stepping down were “*personal and political, but mainly political*”, in the vein of New Zealand’s Jacinda Ardern or other leaders who opt to resign in their prime, citing the many demands and challenges of modern political life.

At 37, Simon Harris became the 16th and youngest ever Taoiseach. Harris heads a coalition composed of his party Fine Gael (EPP), Fianna Fáil (Renew Europe), and The Green Party (Greens-European Free Alliance). The coalition came into being following the general election which took place in February 2020, in the narrow window between the new year and the onset of the global pandemic in March. Indeed, all Irish governments in modern times have been coalitions, but the current government unites Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael for the first time. These parties have led every Irish government since the foundation of the state a century ago, but never together. The opposition is led by Sinn Féin (GUE/NGL) alongside a number of smaller parties including the Labour Party (S&D), the Social Democrats, People Before Profit (GUE/NGL), and 20 members (from 160) who sit as independents.

Euro-enthusiasm in Ireland

The Irish public remains *among the most enthusiastic* about their country’s continued membership of the EU. For many in Ireland, EU membership is associated with the country’s economic and social transformation since the 1980s from being one of the poorest in Europe to one of the richest in the world. It has also allowed the country to gain an international profile and to differentiate itself from the UK, its erstwhile colonial power and near neighbour. There is no organised opposition to membership of the EU in parliamentary or local politics in Ireland.

Critical voices exist, particularly on the left, where the role of the EU in undermining sovereignty or in promoting free market economics is standard fare. The highpoints for such criticism were the 2001 and 2008 referendum

campaigns which saw “no” votes in the first rounds of both the Nice and Lisbon Treaty referendums. Notably, Irish enthusiasm for EU membership has held in spite of the country’s financial bailout by the EU and IMF in 2010 and the years of austerity which followed. It is also widely accepted that Ireland received steadfast support from EU member states for its position vis-à-vis the Irish border amid the UK’s protracted withdrawal (2016-2020).

The campaign

Ireland will elect 14 MEPs in June, one more than the current number, making it among the smallest parliamentary delegations. Seats are divided between three constituencies with four seats elected in the Dublin area, and five each in two sprawling constituencies in Midlands-North-West and the South. By convention, elections for the European Parliament and for all of Ireland’s local authorities take place on the same day, and referendums are occasionally scheduled at the same time (although not this year, following the postponement of a vote on [the proposal for a Unified Patent Court](#)).

As is often the case with elections falling short of a general election, European elections in Ireland are widely viewed as second order in nature and do not play by precisely the same rules. That said, the next general election will take place by March 2025, and the June elections will be seen as an important indicator for what the next government might look like.

General and local elections in Ireland remain highly rooted in constituencies with candidates expected to interact directly with electors in the run-up – and between – campaigns. However, given the scale of the constituencies, European elections tend to be more presidential in nature. This can see high-profile candidates with a ready-made image in the Irish public eye seeking election, including from the worlds of sport (e.g. Sean Kelly MEP, or [Nina Carberry](#), a well-known jockey), television and media (e.g. Commissioner Mairéad McGuinness, and Maria Walsh MEP, a former winner of the [Rose of Tralee international festival](#)), or from frontline national politics (e.g. Barry Andrews MEP or Billy Kelleher MEP).

Candidates begin campaigning months in advance of the election but national attention turns meaningfully to the poll in the month leading up to the poll. RTÉ, the national broadcaster, [initiates a series of television and radio debates with candidates](#) in the four weeks leading up to the elections.

Transnational elections in a very local context

The transnational dimension of these elections and candidates’ affiliations to groups at the European Parliament is more likely to be emphasised by candidates on the left and centre-left. Discussions of any depth of how MEPs and political groups form and operate are unlikely to happen outside specialist discussions and debate among experts and enthusiasts. For the most part, amid the noise of a busy election where dozens of candidates are competing for attention alongside hundreds of local election candidates, budding MEPs are more likely to emphasise their leadership qualities, technical expertise and how they can be a “voice” for their constituents.

Candidates typically include Europarty branding on their election materials but the strongest association is by far with the national party organisation. It would be unlikely to see European political party lead candidates featuring meaningfully in the campaign and it would be difficult to explain the modalities of this to an Irish audience.

The recently established [Coimisiún na Meán](#) (the Media Commission) is responsible for regulating broadcast media in Ireland and strict guidelines exist as regards objectivity, balance and fairness in the coverage of elections. This will also be the first election to take place since the establishment of [An Coimisiún Toghcháin](#) (The Electoral Commission) in 2023 which is responsible for the oversight of elections, including as regards electoral operations, constituency reviews and electoral integrity.

Primarily, media coverage predictably focuses on the relative strengths, weaknesses and campaign commitments of different candidates, as well as the track record in office of those seeking re-election. In addition, in 2024, and in keeping with convention, attention at these debates and throughout the campaign will be paid to the role the EU plays in traditional issues relating to agriculture, the environment and the economy. Environmental regulation and land use, following the passage of the landmark Nature Registration Law in 2023, will feature prominently, particularly among rural communities and farming groups, which are well organised in Ireland.

Migration and asylum policy, including the EU's pact for migration, which the [Irish government has supported](#), has [increased in salience](#) and will feature prominently in the election campaign, following [coverage of increased rates of applications for asylum](#) over recent months. This is the first time that migration will feature prominently in the discourse in advance of a national election in Ireland. Issues relating to Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reform, housing and the cost of living will also feature, as will security and defence policy given Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine and the ongoing [national debate in Ireland regarding the country's security posture](#), but less so than in other parts of Europe where the threat perception posed by Russia is higher. Ireland is historically a strong supporter of EU enlargement and the question of "where Europe ends" is also likely to be debated.

Migration and asylum policy, including the EU's pact for migration, which the Irish government has supported, has increased in salience and will feature prominently in the election campaign.

Possible outcomes

Seventy-three candidates will be competing for Ireland's 14 seats at the European Parliament, with 23 candidates running in each of Dublin and Ireland South, while 27 candidates will contest the Midlands-North-West constituency. Two sitting MEPs (both Fine Gael) will not seek re-election.

At the European elections in 2019, five Fine Gael MEPs were returned alongside three independents, two from Fianna Fáil and two Greens. Sinn Féin underperformed, returning only one MEP. As mentioned, the constituencies for the European elections are large, and given the use of proportional representation by the single transferable vote within multi-seat constituencies, granular data are hard to come by. That said, reference to [opinion polling](#) regarding voting intention is still instructive. Sinn Féin, the main opposition party, has consistently led the polls

It is possible that Ireland's place within the EU will be more contested during these elections than has been the case in the past, but there will still be no anti-EU bloc of meaningful size within the country's politics.

so far in 2024 with 27-29% support, ahead of Fine Gael (19-20%), and Fianna Fáil (15-17%). The existence of three “large parties” is a relatively new phenomenon in Irish politics given the steady gains made by Sinn Féin since the party's breakthrough in 2011, when the country was in the midst of its financial bailout. Remaining party support is divided among the Social Democrats (5-6%), the Green Party (3-4%), the Labour Party (3-4%), the social conservative Aontú (3-4%) and leftist People Before Profit (2-3%). Support for independent candidates remains remarkably high by European standards at 16-19% in most polls, and as high as [24% in some recent polling](#).

Thus, Sinn Féin, consistently the largest party by vote share on both sides of the Irish border, will likely pick up seats in June. The party's position has evolved from one of traditional Euroscepticism, having campaigned against subsequent EU referendums, to behaving like a more conventionally critical social democratic party. Indeed, some in Sinn Féin have proposed seeking a move to the [S&D group](#) after the next election, which has been without an Irish member since 2014.

In sum, it feels likely that Sinn Féin will see gains while Fine Gael, who have been in government since 2011, will lose ground. The Fianna Fáil and Green MEPs, whose parties have served in government for the past four years, will try to maintain their positions. In one version of events, both Sinn Féin and Fine Gael could both emerge as “winners”, depending on how much ground Sinn Féin can make and how much ground Fine Gael can hold. Each of the other returning MEPs have prospects for re-election with some of the independent candidates – old and new – expected to perform well.

A party dubbed “Independent Ireland” has emerged around a group of previously independent members of parliament representing rural interests. As a nod to the presidential nature of these elections mentioned previously, this party secured the nomination of [Ciarán Mullooly](#), a well-known former RTÉ correspondent, to contest the Midlands-North-West constituency. In addition, given the increased salience of migration, voices from the anti-migration hard right, which have been largely absent from the Irish political landscape heretofore, have also surfaced and will feature in the campaign.

Implications for Ireland

These elections, and the Commission's work programme which follows, will be enormously consequential for all Europeans, given the pressing policy demands relating to climate change, Russia's war in Ukraine, competitiveness, security and defence matters, public health and much else. That said, speaking domestically, the results of these European elections will inform the narrative of what government will emerge after the next Irish general election – which is likely to be a version of the current government or a left-wing alternative led by Sinn Féin. As above, it is also highly likely that issues of particular importance in rural Ireland, including as regards agriculture and land use, will feature prominently, as will questions relating to migration policy which will continue to influence and shape public discourse beyond these elections.

Conclusion

It is possible that Ireland's place within the EU will be more contested during these elections than has been the case in the past, but there will still be no anti-EU bloc of meaningful size within the country's politics. The elections are likely to confirm Sinn Féin – who currently hold the office of first minister in the Northern Ireland Executive but have never served in government in the Republic – as the largest party on both sides of the border.

EU membership has always been a mainstay of Irish foreign policy and this is likely to only increase after June. These are the first European elections to take place without the UK, Ireland's nearest neighbour. Given the UK's withdrawal and the potential for political change in the US, a country with which Ireland maintains strong economic and political links, Ireland's EU membership is likely to become only more important as the country seeks to position itself in an ever more contested world.

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After the elections held in March 2023, the Parliament of Estonia saw six parties securing seats. The government was established through a coalition comprising the liberal Reform Party (Renew Europe), the centrist Eesti 200 (no MEPs currently), and the Social Democrats (S&D). The opposition consists of the now Russophone Centre Party (also Renew Europe), the conservative Fatherland (European People's Party), and the populist radical right and Eurosceptic EKRE (Identity and Democracy).

European Parliament (EP) elections have been relatively muted affairs in Estonian politics, despite the population of Estonia consistently showing overwhelming support for EU membership. That support reached a [historical high of 86% in 2022](#) and has remained on this level since then. This sentiment is reflected across the political spectrum, with EKRE being the most vocal critic of EU policies but not advocating for leaving the Union, and other parties being generally supportive of the EU.

All six parliamentary parties are vying to secure one or several of the seven seats allocated to Estonia in the European Parliament. Out of the current MEPs, only one – MEP Andrus Ansip from the Reform Party – [is not running as a candidate](#), reportedly because of clashes with Prime Minister Kaja Kallas. This places the incumbent MEPs in a favourable position, as they can assert their familiarity with EU affairs and credibly claim to advocate for the interests of Estonia and their respective constituencies. As a result, the dynamics of the 2024 election are anticipated to closely resemble those of the 2019 EP election, with almost the same line-up of leading candidates and likely similar results, despite significant shifts in the global political landscape since then.

A non-start to the campaign

Ahead of the election, it is difficult to point out what has been European about matters in Estonian politics. The outcome of the 2023 national elections solidified the dominance of the Reform Party, making it nearly indispensable for forming a government. The coalition established with

Russia's war in Ukraine constitutes the most important international issue in Estonian politics, as all parties have securitised the topic. Thus, the parties disagree over nuances but not the substance of the ramifications that the war and its outcome would have for the future of Estonia.

the Social Democrats and Estonia 200 was predicted to be stable, likely remaining in power for the full parliamentary session – already quite a feat, as rarely has Estonia had one coalition throughout the four-year term. However, the nose-dive in the Centre Party's numbers, from 16 seats to six in a year due to infighting, has further strengthened the coalition, because it has left the conservative Fatherland as the sole viable alternative for the Reform Party if it wished to change partners. Yet the growing poll numbers that Fatherland has enjoyed since the elections, chipping away supporters from both the Reform Party and EKRE, has diminished their prospects of joining the government, because the ruling party prefers partners less popular than they are.

The coalition mathematics are important to explain the dominant characteristic of current Estonian politics: there is strong polarisation between the coalition and the opposition, exemplified by a remarkable level of obstruction in the parliament. Nevertheless, there is little expectation that the power positions will significantly change in the next three years. Russia's war in Ukraine constitutes the most important international issue in Estonian politics, as all parties have securitised the topic; however, there is a broad consensus over how the war is framed in Estonia: as a threat to both European security at large and to Estonia in particular. Thus, the parties disagree over nuances but not the substance of the ramifications that the war and its outcome would have for the future of Estonia.

Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine is present in Estonian politics, then, but connected with domestic concerns, such as the state of the economy and strategies for revitalising growth and discussions on the substance of tax increases. Furthermore, since the 2023 elections there has been a simmering debate over whether residents of Estonia holding Russian and Belarusian citizenship should retain their voting rights in municipal elections. It is raised again from time to time because it enables Fatherland to position itself as the leading opposition party in national politics.

Naturally, the European level is also present in political discourse, especially in relation to the climate issues connected to forestry and renewable energy sources, but explicit connections to the European context remain limited. For instance, there are almost no mentions of the *Spitzenkandidat* process or discussion on how the top jobs in the EU will be reshuffled after the elections. Sometimes, the question of whether Estonia's prime minister, Kaja Kallas, would be nominated for a top-level position is raised, but even in these discussions, there is a prevailing sense that the decision will be made elsewhere.

Therefore, less than a month before the election, the public interest in the EP elections had risen to just lukewarm. The parties' campaigns slowly started to gain momentum only in late April and early May, but not to a degree comparable to national elections (the EP elections in 2019 occurred just few months after the parliamentary elections, thus one campaign shifted into the other and a fair comparison cannot be made). This lack of campaigning cannot be attributed to a dearth of media interest, as outlets have been publishing opinion pieces, hosting candidate debates and providing information about procedural details. Furthermore, the incumbent MEPs began their re-election campaigns in

late 2023, investing in advertising and content marketing in traditional and social media. However, it appears that the parties themselves show little interest in highlighting the significance of EP elections to the public, instead preferring to focus on domestic affairs.

The competition of the incumbents

So far, the primary question has been which parties might manage to secure two of the seven seats – and if any would even gain three. In contrast to national elections, the EP elections offer all parties the chance to exceed or fall short of their position in national politics. This is due to the significant role of prominent candidates, as Estonia forms a single electoral constituency, and parties use open lists. Moreover, due to disproportionality in allocating seats between the member states and [the relatively low turnout](#) previously seen in Estonian EP elections, a party or candidate only needs approximately 34,000 votes to secure a seat.

This provides an opportunity for prominent candidates to gain additional mandates for their parties. Historically, the Social Democrats have been successful in enlisting their popular politicians to play a better hand than their national support would otherwise suggest. Similarly, the favourite this year, according to the opinion polls, is the incumbent MEP Marina Kaljurand from the Social Democrats. Hence the party will likely secure two seats, possibly the second taken by the other incumbent MEP, Sven Mikser. Likewise, the incumbent MEP Urmas Paet from the liberal Reform Party is individually popular and has a more visible election campaign than many other candidates, giving the Reform Party [the second-best chance](#) for obtaining two mandates.

Their profile is heightened by all three being former foreign ministers and often commenting on international affairs, now especially on issues related to the war. Furthermore, the EP is still seen as a place for foreign affairs by Estonian voters and often by politicians as well (Paet, Mikser and MEP Jaak Madison from EKRE are all members of the Committee on Foreign Affairs), thus candidates well versed in foreign affairs have an advantage in the debates. Defence and security are also prominent, especially after 2022, giving an edge to Fatherland's MEP Riho Terras, a former chief of the Estonian Defence Forces who is immersed in defence industry topics. Yet the prestige of international affairs should not be overstated – Estonia 200, despite having the current foreign minister, Margus Tsahkna, as the lead candidate, will struggle to even get a seat. The party's popularity tanked in April 2023 because of a scandal over misappropriation of charity funds designated to aid Ukraine's war efforts, and it has not bounced back since.

This result would leave Fatherland, EKRE and the Centre Party with one seat each, most probably filled by their incumbent MEPs; although some uncertainty remains as the decline in the support of the Centre Party offers hope to the other two conservative parties that it would be to their benefit. However, this forecast should be taken with a pinch of salt, because the opinion polling gives a close ranking to the four most popular parties and small differences in voting can translate into different outcomes. This is an election of candidates, not of parties, resulting in a high degree of uncertainty of how seats will be distributed.

The most remarkable aspect of the 2024 EP elections in Estonia is the lack of anything remarkable, despite the political upheavals in Europe and around the world in recent years.

The primacy of security

The significance of Russia's war in Ukraine is reflected in the party programmes published for the EP elections, as all manifestoes start with the security of Estonia, while other topics, such as economic growth, migration, climate issues or regional development are, to some extent, securitised. The Reform Party, Fatherland, Social Democrats, the Centre Party and Eesti 200 call for the establishment of a defence commissioner. Furthermore, these parties support EU enlargement, emphasising the importance of admitting new members through a merit-based process, not solely as a political gesture, but without erecting unjustified barriers. All parties underline strengthening defence capabilities and supporting the defence industry. Likewise, border security is a top priority for parties across the spectrum, from EKRE to the Social Democrats, reflecting Estonia's position as an EU border state.

The Reform Party is hoping to repeat its success in last year's elections by prioritising the same themes: security and independence. Specifically, they want to utilise Eurobonds to invest in the European defence industry. Additionally, the Reform Party advocates for the extension of qualified majority voting (QMV) to foreign policy matters concerning sanctions, human rights violations and organised crime. While MEP Urmas Paet has voiced strong support for [the extension of QMV](#) in the past, there is no consensus in Estonian politics on this question and the government maintains that the right of veto should be retained.

Fatherland addresses similar themes in its programme but given its role as an opposition party, a significant portion of the document is dedicated to critiquing the current government. Security is a priority topic both for the Fatherland party and their frontrunner MEP Riho Terras. Thus, in the programme they advocate for increasing defence expenditure to 3% of GDP for all EU member states. They emphasise member states' sovereignty over migration policy, support bolstering the Frontex budget and advocate for securing agreements with North African countries to curb migrant arrivals in Europe. In addition to Ukraine and Russia, they underscore [other potential global threats](#), notably highlighting China as a long-term strategic challenge to democratic nations.

Freedom, fairness and security stand as the cornerstone themes for the Social Democrats. They assert that in the upcoming elections the future of Estonia and Europe is at stake, because of the Russian war of aggression and the global upheavals stemming from economic, health and climate crises. With a pro-EU, pro-NATO and pro-transatlantic relations stance, [the Social Democrats' platform](#) closely mirrors that of the other parties and reflects the prevailing consensus on Estonian foreign policy.

[EKRE calls for](#) the EU to revert to its roots as a union of nation-states. They are in favour of the repatriation of migrants to their home countries, including Ukrainian refugees once the war concludes, and oppose all EU migration quotas. Like other parties, they advocate for increased efforts to enhance the defence industry and support joint procurement of armaments.

To sum up, the most remarkable aspect of the 2024 EP elections in Estonia is the lack of anything remarkable, despite the political upheavals in Europe and around the world in recent years. Barring any unforeseen events, four to six of the next MEPs will be incumbents, which means they are the most experienced candidates, but this has also dampened the emergence of a vibrant political debate.

The politicisation of European affairs, and the steady rise of clashing views on them, is a growing and irrepressible phenomenon. In this context, the outcome of the elections to the European Parliament will determine the future of the legislative process on many issues: the green agenda, European Union's future enlargement, the defence policy, the debate over the EU's own resources. Legislative progress will depend on the majorities that form in the new parliament, and on the nature and composition of the new European Commission. The first step in defining the new majorities in the EU will be decided at the polls from June 6 to 9, 2024.