

FINAL REPORT

More diverse than united?

A comparative analysis of the EU elections 2024

October 2024

Table of contents

Introduction	4
<i>Sophie Porschlegel, Das Progressive Zentrum</i>	
Country and EU analyses	
From European elections to French political crisis	9
<i>Marc-Olivier Padis, Terra Nova</i>	
A Non-European Germany	23
<i>Daniel Schade, Das Progressive Zentrum</i>	
The return of a clear right-left divide in Italy	35
<i>Luca Barana, Istituto Affari Internazionali</i>	
Poland is back at the European table	47
<i>Maria Skóra, Das Progressive Zentrum</i>	
The centre in the EU holds, for now	61
<i>Eric Maurice, European Policy Centre</i>	
Key takeaways, recommendations, conclusion	
European elections remain "second-order" through and through	79
<i>Sophie Porschlegel, Das Progressive Zentrum</i>	
Conclusion	88
<i>Sophie Porschlegel, Das Progressive Zentrum</i>	
About	91
Imprint	94

Introduction

Sophie Pornschlegel, Das Progressive Zentrum

The European elections mark a crucial moment in the EU's democratic life. Despite continuing to be "second order elections", which means that citizens consider EU elections less relevant than at national level, the EP election is an important moment to test the political mood and priorities of over 350 million EU citizens.

Once EP elections are over, the public attention quickly turns away from the result and on to the next steps: the European Council's Strategic Agenda; the nominations for the "top jobs"; the election of the Commission president and the new political guidelines; the nominations from member states for the commissioners; the formation of the different committees in the European Parliament. Within a few months, the fleeting interest of the national media in the EU elections – and the EU as a political system – quickly disappears; and discussions in Brussels turn back to policymaking.

However, it is worth spending a little longer on the polity and politics of the EU. Indeed, the European elections is when EU citizens largely decide upon the power dynamics in the EU and the political agenda for the next five years - together with national elections in member states, which affect the EU Council. European elections determine the Parliament's composition, and whether it will be united or fragmented; they also determine the European Parliament's position in the interinstitutional competition between the Commission, Council and Parliament. The electoral turnout also decides upon the legitimacy of the Parliament: The lower the turnout, the less the EP can claim to be representative of EU citizens' choices and preferences. Independently of turnout, the EP elections also give insights into the topics and policies important to citizens; and influences the EU's political agenda for the next five years. Above all, the elections largely determine

the composition of the European Parliament and as such an important decision-making body in the EU; therefore, EU elections also largely decide upon the EU's 'capacity to act'.

The 2024 European elections came amidst a tumultuous political context. Since the last elections in 2019, the EU had to face multiple crises: first the Covid-19 pandemic, triggering economic hardship and recession. From 2022 onwards, Russia's war in Ukraine put into question stability and security on the European continent. These crises came on top of more systemic challenges, such as the climate crisis and the growing fragmentation and polarisation of societies in EU member states. Finally, the threat of far-right extremism in Europe, linked to the general decline of citizens' trust in politics, cast doubt on the sustainability of democracy in Europe.

Against this backdrop, this project brought together a group of researchers from France, Germany, Poland and Italy to monitor, analyse and compare the EP elections campaigns and results in these four member states, and on top of that at the EU level. We chose to focus on the biggest member states in terms of demographics: France, Germany, Italy and Poland. As such, this study is not representative of the EU elections in the 27 member states. Nor does it build on its own quantitative analysis or survey polls.

Instead, the project aimed to identify commonalities and differences in political issues and public debates across the EU; reveal ideological and issues-based cleavages; and compare attitudes of citizens. The researchers used a joint methodological approach, analysing opinion polls and the election results, interviewing relevant stakeholders, and monitoring the election campaign. The objective of this project was threefold: to create a truly European perspec-

tive on the election campaigns and results; provide insights for those who would like to improve and Europeanise the EP electoral processes; and actively contribute to a transnational exchange among think tanks in the EU.

The researchers examined the following aspects of the European elections campaigns and results: First, the general political context, both at EU level and in the participating countries; Second, issues and cleavages which were relevant in the election campaigns and in the media; Third, party programmes and messages, as well as political figures, which positions they endorsed and whether they will play an important role in the upcoming mandate; Fourth, attitudes towards the EU and whether the Euro-sceptic sentiment increased or decreased; Fifth, voting intentions and then the election result – in particular, which parties and figures did well, if there were significant changes compared to the 2019 European election and compared to the initial polls in 2024; as well as turnout. Lastly, some researchers also looked at the strategic position of countries in the European Parliament, such as how many MEPs countries will be sent to Brussels, and whether certain countries are expected to play a prevalent role in certain EU institutions or on certain EU policy fields.

The project built on earlier research done by Maria Skóra and Sophie Pornschlegel for the 2019 European elections, which included a comparative analysis of France, Germany and Poland ("The European Election 2019: A Comparative Outlook at the European Election Campaigns in France, Germany and Poland"); as well as the work done by Sophie Pornschlegel and Johannes Greubel in 2021 at the European Policy Centre focusing on the national perspectives on Germany in the EU for the German parliamentary elections of 2021.

Country and EU analyses

From European elections to French political crisis

Marc Olivier-Padis, Terra Nova

Executive summary

For the first time since the first direct European elections in 1979, this election had direct political consequences in France. From the start of the election campaign, this election appeared to be a mid-term vote, with a strong sanctioning vote against the French president. In an unexpected move, President Macron announced the dissolution of the National Assembly on the evening of 9 June 2024, giving the result of the European vote an unprecedented national importance.

The French campaign for the European elections saw a record number of electoral lists: 38 in total. Under French electoral rules, however, only lists achieving 5% of the casted votes are elected to the European Parliament (EP). This meant that only seven lists were really in contention. Turnout, at 51.5%, was the highest in 30 years.

The results of the vote were pretty much in line with what opinion poll predicted: National Rally (RN) came out on top in the elections, with gains across all demographic categories. The campaign also saw the emergence of the pro-European left-wing list called "Réveiller l'Europe", led by outgoing MEP Raphaël Glucksmann, who clearly distanced himself from the radical left-wing France Unbowed (LFI) list. The presidential majority list ("Besoin d'Europe") performed worse than in the last elections five years ago, foreshadowing its decline in the subsequent legislative elections, in the two rounds on 30 June and 7 July 2024.

National topics dominated the election campaign, with purchasing power, inflation, energy prices and food being the main concerns of voters. Immigration was also a dominant topic, mostly put forward by the far right. The National Rally, which has been the favourite in the opinion polls for several months, did not really present an electoral programme. It merely withdrew the most visible anti-European proposals from its programme, such as leaving the euro, however without publishing an economic pro-

gramme and while showing opposition to ambitious European policies.

The legislative elections initially prolonged the momentum of the Rassemblement National in the first round; however, a stronger-than-expected "Republican Front" - an alliance of left and green parties - won in the second round on 7 July, rather unexpectedly. The National Assembly emerged more divided than before, with no clear majority and three main political forces. For President Emmanuel Macron, these two elections weakened his position. Without the possibility of standing for re-election in the next presidential elections in 2027 without a majority in the National Assembly, and without a major win in the European Parliament, his influence in Europe is likely to decline until the end of his term.

More broadly, French influence is likely to be very limited within the European Parliament, since the delegations of French Members of Parliament (MEPs) are small in the two main EP groups, the Socialists & Democrats (S&D) and the European People's Party (EPP). In addition, French MEPs are represented in large numbers in groups that contribute little to parliamentary work, the Left group (GUE/NGL) and the new radical right Patriots for Europe group. Without this influence and with stronger radical wings likely to report back on European issues in the domestic context, there is a higher risk for French citizens to misunderstand European issues in the future.

An election dominated by national issues

The European election campaign in France was dominated by the domestic political context, which weighed heavily on the campaign. The vote appeared to be a mid-term judgement on French President Emmanuel Macron, two years after his re-election as President. The government re-

shuffle in January 2024, with the departure of Elisabeth Borne and the arrival of Gabriel Attal as prime minister, was intended to boost the presidential majority's campaign for the European elections.

The far-right National Rally (RN) amplified this effective nationalisation of the European election by announcing well in advance that it would call for a dissolution of Parliament after the vote in anticipation of a resounding win for the far-right. The far-left party ^France Unbowed, for its part, played the same national tune, announcing that it regarded the vote as "the first round of the presidential election". Finally, in a highly unusual move by Macron, the actual result led to the dissolution of the National Assembly, which largely overshadowed the outcome of the vote itself. The European election in France therefore was predominantly national, both in the campaign and in the result.

The nationalisation of the issues at stake was also reflected in voter preferences, with 45% voting on domestic policy issues (43% in 2019) and 55% on European issues. Unsurprisingly, this focus on domestic political issues was as much as 73% for voters of Jordan Bardella, the RN's lead candidate. One in three (29%) voted to reject Emmanuel Macron "above all else". This number leapt to 68% for RN voters.¹

A campaign with few surprises

The general tone of the campaign was set very early on and hardly changed over the weeks before the election date. The far-right list's lead was established since January 2024, with 75% of RN voters firming up their intentions well in advance.² The presidential majority party (Macronist) list "Besoin d'Europe" (Need for Europe) started its campaign very late, in March, with a little known lead candidate, Valérie Hayer, who was a Member of

Figure 1: French political parties, alliances, and affiliations (Source: Politico)



the European Parliament (MEP) for the centrist/Liberal Renew Europe group. Only the centre-left list "*Réveiller l'Europe*" (Wake up Europe) with lead candidate Raphaël Glucksmann progressed slightly in the months leading up to the election, although he failed to secure second place, ending up behind RN and Macron's list.

Voting intentions remained very stable. In comparison with polls in March, there was very little change in public opinion over the three months up to the day of voting, apart from a dip in support for Macron's list. Backing for the far-right RN list, often wrongly estimated in polls due to the volatility of its electorate, was fully in line with forecasts this time. This was undoubtedly due to a strong push among its potential electorate to turn out in its favour this time, whereas they often abstain. Indeed, the far-right electorate was if anything super-mobilised in 2024: 60% of Marine Le Pen's voters in the presidential elections of 2022 took part in the European elections (and even 69% of voters of the extremist far-right candidate Éric Zemmour from the new party "Reconquête") compared with just 54% of Emmanuel Macron's voters in 2022.

The campaign had therefore little to no influence on pre-set voting intentions. Even the intervention by the president at the Sorbonne University on 25 April 2024 had no positive impact on his candidate's list.³ Similarly, the major TV debate between the prime minister, Gabriel Attal, and the lead RN candidate, Jordan Bardella, on 23 May, left RN support unchanged.

Substantial progress for the far-right

The RN, tipped as the favourite for the election, went out of its way to avoid taking any risks. The lead candidate, Jordan Bardella, did little to present his programme in detail. Despite several announcements,

he did not, for example, make any proposals on economic policy. This was no doubt to avoid scrutiny and rebuttal, especially as the party has been trying to appear more credible on the substance for several years. The campaign booklet simply repeated most of its 2019 proposals.

In the past five years, the RN has slightly shifted its position on Europe, acknowledging the French people's attachment to the EU and the euro. However, this shift in no way signifies a fundamental commitment to the European project. On the contrary, the programme promises a 'Frexit' in "bits and pieces" (as the centrist French MP/ex-MEP Jean-Louis Bourlanges put it). Indeed, in its project for a "Europe of Nations", almost all current EU policies are challenged, with the exception of the Erasmus+ exchange programme, cooperation on civil protection, scientific exchanges and industrial cooperation such as on artificial intelligence. Conversely, the Schengen area, Frontex and the single market would only be acceptable to the RN "under new conditions". In addition, the Union's external policy, the energy market, enlargement and any form of common debt are categorically rejected. Bardella also declared towards the end of the campaign that he wanted to reduce France's contribution to the European budget (Multiannual Financial Framework, MFF) by €2 to 3 billion, i.e. a cut of around 10-15% of the overall French contribution.⁴

For the presidential majority, renowned for its pro-European commitment, the aim of this election was to consolidate the (centrist/Liberal) Renew group in the European Parliament and to support Emmanuel Macron's European initiatives. Macron's second Sorbonne speech and Attal's strong involvement in the campaign although he wasn't even a candidate were steps to ensure the campaign's success. However, despite Macron's high-profile interventions, the president emerged weakened by the election result.

For the Left, the campaign was very much about domestic politics. La France Insoumise (LFI) intended to put its leader, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, in a domi-

Figure 2: Voting intentions for the EP election in France (29 May 2024, Data from Euronews)

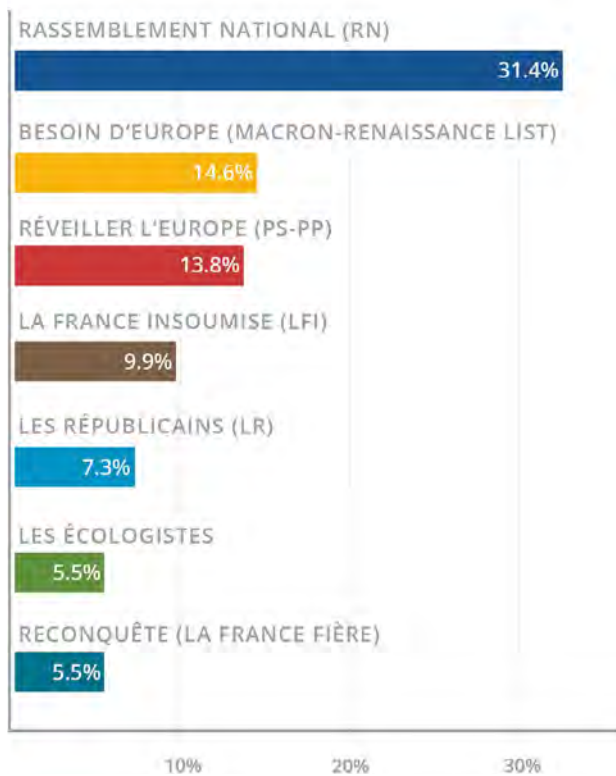
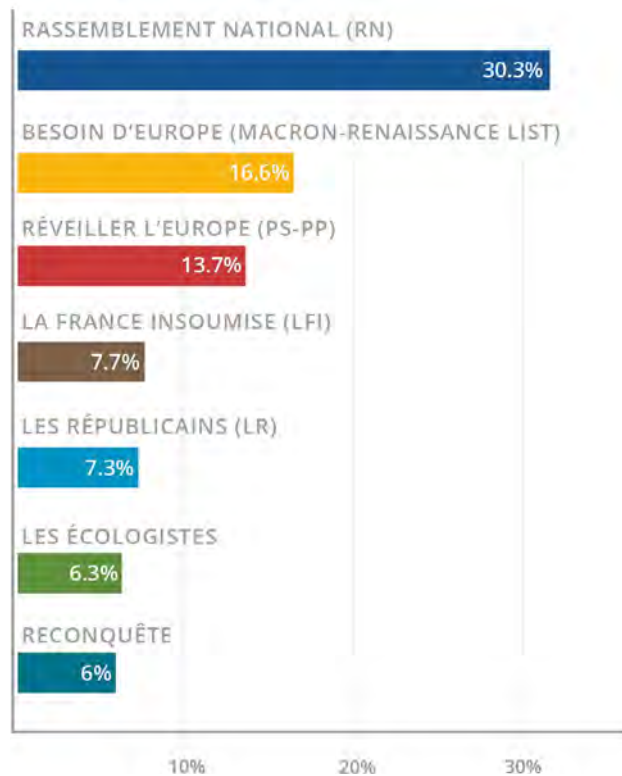


Figure 3: EP election result in France (10 June 2024, Data from Euronews)



nant position on the left of the political spectrum, in order to establish him as the most credible candidate for the next presidential election in 2027. In contrast, MEP Raphaël Glucksmann, lead candidate for the "Wake up Europe" list, which was supported by the Socialist Party and Public Space (*Place Publique*)⁵, ran a campaign focused on European issues, primarily the geopolitical challenge posed by Russia's war in Ukraine. This led the list to clearly distance itself from LFI's eurosceptic rhetoric and ambivalent positions on Russia, as LFI's campaign leaflet proposed "building peace in Ukraine" without clearly identifying the forces involved or indeed how this might come about. The increased support for this list during the campaign demonstrated that an alternative constellation could be built within the left, especially compared to earlier alliances dominated by LFI, such as the New ecological and social People's Union (NUPES), set up in the National Assembly for the 2022 legislative elections. This

pro-European stance attracted left-wing voters who had switched to Macron's Renaissance list in the 2019 European elections. 11% of voters on the Renaissance list in 2019 went to Glucksmann's list this year and he also snatched lots of Green votes (27% of 2019 Green voters), which partly explains their low final score.⁶

Campaign themes: Purchasing power and immigration

Like the virtually unchanged voting intentions, the campaign was not very animated, with a very clear hierarchy of themes set out from the start. France's role in Europe grew slightly as a topic for discussion

as the campaign wore on, but domestic politics and everyday issues such as the cost of living clearly overshadowed any European ones.

This is borne out by a comparison of issues important to the French at the start of the campaign with what voters said they had voted on which shows that no party managed to change the order of voter priorities:

The standard of living emerged as a key issue in this campaign for two reasons. First, inflation remains an important challenge, even if it has gone down considerably in France (2.3% in April 2024, compared with almost 7% a year earlier). Inflation is still felt keenly by households, mostly because of food prices. This is also why farmers' protests won backing from the French public at the start of 2024. The farmers' demonstrations ahead of the yearly National Agricultural Fair in February 2024 launched a movement against the EU's Green Deal and the latter gained scant and ineffective support from the presidential majority.⁷ Generally speaking, little was said about the performance of EU institutions during the campaign.

Inflation was also an issue due to increasing energy costs as a result of the Russian war against Ukraine. This had an impact on French households during 2022, despite France's highly electrified energy production. Electricity prices were a rather unexpected campaign theme, with the far-right RN proposing to take France out of the European electricity market. This proposal is a reminder of the extent to which the evolution of the RN's discourse on the European Union is deceptive: the RN says it no longer wants to leave the EU or return to the franc, but contests France's participation in the EU, without being able to argue seriously on the merits of the benefits that leaving the European electricity market would bring, for example.

In second place, immigration was a prevalent topic. It is also the top issue for the far-right. It connects various concerns of French citizens, primarily security and terrorism, which appear in 5th and 6th

position in the list of issues of high political salience, along with living standards and jobs.⁸ The European Migration Pact was highlighted by the RN as a threat to security in an only-to-be-expected denunciation of Europe "imposing mass immigration". The decision to place the former Executive Director of Frontex (2015-2022), Fabrice Leggeri, in third position on Bardella's list marked a desire to boost RN expertise on the migration issue. However, he made few appearances during the campaign because of criticism from the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) about his management of Frontex.⁹ As he was placed high on the list, he was nevertheless elected.

It is interesting to note that compared to other European countries in which health did not play a role in the campaigns, e.g., in Italy, Germany or Poland, it was an important one for French voters. This seems to indicate that after the joint European action during Covid-19, voters expect Europe to act as one on the subject, despite the limited scope of EU powers in this policy field.

Support for Ukraine was a subject highlighted by the progressive lead candidate Glucksmann, whose first political involvement was in Georgia after the "Rose Revolution" in 2003. It was also one of the political markers put down by Macron's lead candidate, Valérie Hayer. This issue provided an opportunity to challenge the RN, whose long-standing pro-Russian stance has been slowly corrected since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. While the RN concedes verbal support for Ukraine, Le Pen has raised fears of an open conflict with Russia, especially after Macron's statements on maybe sending French troops to Ukraine.

It was Israel's military action in Gaza in response to the massacres committed by Hamas on 7 October that was at the heart of the LFI campaign. Although the subject strictly speaking does not fall within the remit of the European Parliament, LFI made "*imposing* peace on Gaza" its distinctive theme, while showing great restraint in relation to Russia ("*building* peace in Ukraine").

The votes: A political landscape dominated by the rise of the far-right

Unsurprisingly, it was the far-right list led by Bardella that came out as the winner of this election, with 31.37% of the vote (30 seats out of a total of 81 for France). This result is all the more remarkable given that, until now, RN voters have paid little attention to European issues.

It can be explained by two factors. First, a very good mobilisation of the far-right's traditional base. Voters for Le Pen in the presidential election of 2022 voted massively for Bardella's European list – between 86% and 90% according to surveys.¹⁰ The vote was also very strong in the professional categories in which the RN traditionally scores highly: white-collar workers (40%) and blue-collar workers (now up to 54%).

Second, the RN made headway in categories that had been less receptive, such as managers (from 13% to 20% of the vote, or up seven percentage points) and pensioners (up from 22% to 29%). Since Le Pen became leader in 2011, the gender gap has gradually been closed, so that the under-representation of women voters, which has long characterised the RN vote, has now been erased.¹¹ The far-right also made gains among young voters, especially the under-25s (up from 15% to 26%), no doubt thanks to the image of the young lead candidate, Bardella, who is only 28 and to his strong presence on social networks where he has nearly 2m followers on TikTok.¹² However, he did not score best in this age group (the RN tally is stronger in the 25-65 age group). Generally speaking, Bardella owes his strong showing to the votes of working people. Politically, he took votes from conservative voters (20% of those who voted for the centre-right candidate Valérie Pécresse in the last legislative elections in 2022) and from his far-right rival Zemmour (26% or 43%, depending on the survey).¹³

The RN, whose star is on the rise, is a catch-all party whose electorate no longer differs massively from

the French average voter. A geographical comparison of the RN vote for the last three European elections shows that it is gradually spreading, including in areas where it has always been low, such as Brittany and the greater West, as well as the Paris metropolitan area. However, there are still areas where the RN vote is at its strongest: the formerly industrial north of France, the Provence-Côte d'Azur and Languedoc regions, and the Garonne valley.

All in all, we can say that voting for the RN has become more commonplace, since it is no longer seen as shameful. This is due to the party's long normalisation course in recent years ("*dédiabolisation*" or de-demonising), which has helped bring it in from the cold. However, it is still not completely credible on substance, as demonstrated by the lead candidate's great caution about his programme.

The presidential majority list "Need for Europe" was the big loser on 9 June, with just 14.6% of the vote after winning 22.4% in 2019. It was clearly outgunned by the RN and was unable to mobilise its supporters, in an election that ostensibly should have mattered greatly to its pro-European electorate. Only one in two Macron voters in the first round of the 2022 presidential election chose to vote for lead candidate Hayer's list. Compared with the European election of 2019, Macron's party Renaissance lost serious ground among employees, blue-collar workers and the unemployed, and even more so among managers (from 29% to 15%) and young people (from 17% to 7%).¹⁴ Macron's list only really scored well with pensioners and the most privileged categories.

The party appears to be too dependent on the president and suffers from the rejectionist vote directed at Macron's policies. In addition, the president has been criticised for his top-down use of power, as illustrated by the surprise decision to dissolve the National Assembly. This followed an opaque deliberation process of which even his own prime minister, Attal, was only informed at the last moment. This practice can be explained, beyond personal dispositions of Macron, by the president's desire to retain the power of initiative and to make full use of his constitutional

prerogatives. The personalisation of power, typical of the French Fifth Republic, ended up backfiring on the president's party and turned the vote in these European elections into an 'anti-Macron' ballot.

The leftist alliance between the Socialist Party (PS) and Public Space saw the biggest increase since the last European election in 2019, rising from 6% to almost 14%. However, the flat results among blue-collar workers (7% in both 2019 and 2024), as well as among young people aged 18-25 (5% in both elections) illustrate the limits of this progress. Lead candidate Glucksmann's list is the one that brings together voters from across the left: 25% of Mélenchon's electorate, 35% of Yannick Jadot's, 30% of Fabien Roussel's and 15% of Macron's.¹⁵ On election night, Glucksmann announced that he wanted to play a role at national level, contributing to building a "new political space". His aim is to challenge Mélenchon's hold on NUPES so dominant in the 2022 legislative elections. Glucksmann also wanted to forge a new progressive and pro-European offer on the left. But the sudden dissolution of the National Assembly immediately closed the political space he could occupy insofar as his movement, Public Space, is not sufficiently well-established in France to present candidates for the legislative elections.

The Republicans party (LR) won 7.25% of the votes, but will only send a small delegation to the European Parliament as part of the European People's Party (EPP). This party was unable to attract new voters compared to 2019 when it secured eight seats with 8.48% of the votes. It did not benefit from any significant transfer of votes from the other parties. Worse still, it did not even manage to retain its electorate, a fifth of whom voted for the RN. The party scores well only in a small number of categories, such as among the upper class of pensioners (11%) and the over-70s (12%).¹⁶

The Greens were in danger of failing to reach the 5% threshold. With 5.5% of the votes, they saved just five of their seats, a sharp drop on 2019 (13.5%). The Greens' message has been weakened by rising prices, particularly for energy, as well as attacks from both

the farming community (against the Green Deal) and the far-right (rallying against "punitive ecology"). Their lead candidate, Marie Toussaint, was unfamiliar to the French public and found herself in stark competition with other left candidates, in particular Manon Aubry (LFI) and Glucksmann, who had also included environmental themes in their programme.

The LFI was up slightly to almost 10% (+3 points compared with 2019). The profile of its electorate is very marked both in terms of age and geography. LFI is the only party with a very unbalanced geographical spread. It only scores significantly in a few electoral strongholds limited to the region of Paris ("*Ile de France*") and a few metropolitan areas (Lyon, Montpellier, Toulouse, Lille). For example, it came first in the 19^e and 20^e *arrondissements* of the capital, as well as in the *banlieues* (suburbs) of Paris, Seine-Saint-Denis and Val-de-Marne. It also scored well among 18-24 year-olds (23%). This age group's voting appears to be polarised between two extremes, with very low scores (5-6%) for the traditional or governing parties. LFI's campaign had very little to do with European issues, focusing its messaging on the situation in Gaza in a particularly divisive way. This issue seems to have been an important determinant of the vote among young voters: 22% of 18-24 year-olds cite it as an important issue, compared with 6% of voters overall.¹⁷

An election with far-reaching consequences: The dissolution of the National Assembly and the 2024 general elections

The decision by the president to dissolve the National Assembly the night of the European election result overshadowed any analysis of the results in France. Macron's decision is unprecedented in French political life. The power to dissolve the parliament is a presidential prerogative. In the Fifth Republic – France's political system since 1958 – it was most commonly used to bring the result of the presidential election in line with the parliamentary majority (e.g. François Mitterrand after the 1981 vote). Dissolution had never followed a European election before, so this is the first time that a Head of State has interpreted a European election result as a challenge to his power at national level. Indeed, until now, European elections have never led to major political changes in France (reshuffles, etc.). The surprise effect sought by the president was complete.

The president's choice has thrown France into an unfamiliar political situation. The decision was justified retrospectively by the fact that the government would have to face a vote of no confidence in the autumn, at the time of the budget vote. It is also a belated recognition by Macron that governing without an absolute majority is fraught with difficulties. Voters in the 2022 legislative elections did not give the president a working majority, a first under the Fifth Republic.

There were several factors that led to the RN victory in the first round of the legislative elections: first, the radicalisation of the right-wing electorate; second, mistrust of the president and his policies; third, the momentum given to the far-right through its good score in the European elections; fourth, the campaign's brevity; and fifth, the unpreparedness of the presidential majority.

However, the prospect of a far-right prime minister led the other political parties to follow a strategy to block the far-right from reaching power (a so-called "*barrage républicain*" or republican dam). They withdrew their candidates in the second round of the legislative elections in constituencies that had three-way races ("*triangulaires*") under the electoral law which allows for 2,3 or 4 candidates to reach the second round if no candidate has an absolute majority in the first round. This would make it more difficult for the RN candidates to get elected. As a result, the number of three-way races fell from 306 to 89. The high turnout in the second round (67%) and the goodly number of electoral switches from one party to another in the second round standing against a RN candidate (these candidates were part of the so-called republican front and with the better chance of winning (aka tactical voting) ultimately shrank the number of far-right victories. RN still forms the largest group in Parliament, with 143 MEPs compared with 89 in the outgoing National Assembly – a staggering increase of 60%. However, the republican front managed to squeeze them into third place behind the hastily-assembled leftist New Popular Front (NFP - in a conscious echo of the 1930s) and the centrist alliance around Macron's party (Together).

The electoral coalitions which came first and second – the leftist NFP, which includes the LFI, the Communist Party, Greens and the Socialist Party, and the centrist "Ensemble", which includes Renaissance, *Modem* and Horizons, are now under pressure to agree to form a parliamentary coalition capable of supporting a new government – an unprecedented situation in France, where political parties are not used to form governing coalitions as in Germany, Italy and the Netherlands.

Conclusion

The result of the European elections in France heralds a decline in the country's influence within the European Parliament (EP). Two EP groups with larger numbers of French members, Identity and Democracy (ID) that includes the RN (30 seats) - now a constituent part of a new group called Patriots for Europe (PfE) - and the European Left Group (GUE/NGL) that includes LFI (9 seats), will remain outside the legislative majority.

The French component (The Republicans) in the EP's largest group, the EPP, will be particularly small (six seats). The French are also weaker within the Renew group, which was supposed to be the vehicle for maximising Macron's influence inside the EP. Only the growth of the Socialist list (S&D) corresponds to a trend also observed in other countries (such as Italy), as the Glucksmann list won 13 seats, along with the decline of the Greens, such as in Germany, where they also lost a considerable amount of seats.

Overall, the French carry little weight in the major parliamentary groups and retain any influence if at all only in the groups that are not power brokers in the EP. This discrepancy contributes to the weakening of France's position in Europe, which is in turn exacerbated by a weakened President Macron in the European Council and the Council of the EU, given that he is (as of now) deprived of a majority in the French National Assembly. There is also a risk that this weakening of the French position will not be perceived sufficiently by French citizens, who may lose interest in the parliamentary work carried out in Brussels and Strasbourg.

References

- 1 "Understanding the French vote", IPSOS, 9 June 2024, p. 13.
- 2 "Understanding the French vote", IPSOS, 9 June 2024, p. 6.
- 3 Dubbed the second Sorbonne speech, in reference to the first Sorbonne speech held a few months after his election as President in September 2017.
- 4 Bourgerie-Gonse, Théo, "Far right's Bardella vows '€2 to €3 billion' cut in French contribution to EU budget", Euractiv, 21 June 2024, <https://www.euractiv.fr/section/elections/news/far-rights-bardella-vows-e2-to-3-blm-cut-in-french-contribution-to-eu-budget/>
- 5 Place Publique is the pro-European movement founded by Raphaël Glucksmann before the 2019 elections.
- 6 The "Salon de l'agriculture" is a major political event in France attended by all important decision-makers in the country, including the French President.
- 7 Pascual, Julia, "Comment la question migratoire a pesé sur le scrutin européen", Le Monde, 14 June 2024. https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2024/06/12/elections-europeennes-comment-la-question-migratoire-a-pese-sur-le-vote-des-francais_6239165_3224.html
- 8 Geslin, Laurent, "Fabrice Leggeri, numéro 3 de la liste RN, visé par une plainte pour complicité de crimes contre l'humanité et de torture", Euractiv, 24 April 2024, <https://www.euractiv.fr/section/elections/news/fabrice-leggeri-numero-3-de-la-liste-rn-ise-par-une-plainte-pour-complicite-de-crimes-contre-lhumanite-et-de-torture/>
- 9 BVA, "Intentions de vote aux élections européennes ", juin 2024 et Harris Interactive, " La sociologie du vote ", 9 juin 2024.
- 10 A radical right gender gap also observed in other countries, such as Austria and Germany. See Givens, T. E. (2004), "The Radical Right Gender Gap", Comparative Political Studies, 37(1), 30-54. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414003260124>
- 11 Clairouin, Olivier, "Comment expliquer le succès de Jordan Bardella sur Tik Tok ?", Le Monde, 5 July 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/pixels/article/2024/07/05/comment-expliquer-le-succes-de-jordan-bardella-sur-tiktok_6246964_4408996.html
- 12 BVA, "Intentions de vote aux élections européennes ", juin 2024 et Harris Interactive, " La sociologie du vote ", 9 juin 2024.
- 13 Harris Interactive, "La Sociologie du vote", 9 juin 2024.
- 14 Harris Interactive, "La sociologie du vote", 9 juin 2024.
- 15 Harris Interactive, "La sociologie du vote", 9 juin 2024.
- 16 All these figures are taken from post-election surveys by Ipsos and Harris Interactive.

About the author



Marc-Olivier Padis is Director of Studies at Terra Nova. He is a publisher and commentator on French and European politics. He was editor-in-chief and director of Esprit magazine for nearly twenty years. He is a regular contributor to the political commentary podcast "Le Nouvel Esprit public", hosted by Philippe Meyer. He was a member of the editorial board of Eurozine (2009-2015) and a member of the board of governors of Université Paris 3 Sorbonne-nouvelle in 2014 and 2015. From 2005 to 2011, he was a professor at Sciences Po Paris, where he taught European politics. Marc-Olivier has written about French political philosophy (Marcel Gauchet, *la genèse de la démocratie*, Michalon, 1996) and international relations (*Les Multinationales du cœur*, with Thierry Pech, *Le Seuil/La République des idées*, 2004).



[@Mo_Padis](#)



[Marc-Olivier Padis](#)



[@marcolivierpadis.bsky.social](#)

About Terra Nova



Terra Nova is an independent civil society think tank. Its purpose is to publish and promote innovative proposals and policy solutions for France and Europe that respond to contemporary challenges and needs. Its experts take part in the key public policy debates, informing policymakers, opinion leaders and other interested parties. Terra Nova is independent of any political party and sets its own agenda and objectives.



[@_Terra_Nova](#)



[Terra Nova](#)

www.tnova.fr

A Non-European Germany

Daniel Schade, Das Progressive Zentrum

Introduction

With 96 seats at stake in total, the largest national delegation in the EU-27, the European election results in Germany hugely influence the overall composition of the European Parliament (EP).¹ Putting aside the oddity of the campaign, the implications of the political shifts in the EU's largest member state warrant close examination. While Germany's party system has remained significantly more stable in the past than in other European countries, this election shows that Germany is now on a similar pathway. Much like elsewhere, the election there was shaped by ongoing political polarisation rather than a genuine debate on European issues.

The political context of the European Parliament election in Germany

As in other European countries, the elections in Germany took place in a heated political context, marked by ongoing changes to the country's party system. Aside from the long-term rise of the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD), a new party emerged early in 2024, led by the former leader of the Left party ("Die Linke") Sahra Wagenknecht, who set up the eponymous 'Bündnis (Alliance) Sahra Wagenknecht', BSW. This political movement combines left-wing populist positions with an anti-immigrant stance and pro-Russian rhetoric. It quickly demonstrated its electoral potential in polls. Given its recent launch, the European election was its first genuine electoral test.

These wider shifts in the party system are taking place in a particularly intense electoral context, with several important regional ("*Länder*") elections scheduled for later this year and in the run-up to the next federal election in autumn 2025.

The current federal three-party "traffic light" coalition government, which embraces the Social Democrats (SPD), the Green Party, and the Liberals (FDP), is widely unpopular. This is mostly due to certain policy decisions, such as a law designed to decarbonise the domestic heating sector by installing heat pumps, pioneered by the Green Economics Minister, and continuous infighting, especially between the Greens and the Liberals. This European election could well have served as a 'test-run' for the federal election due in little more than a year.

At the same time, several *Länder* in Eastern Germany will go to the ballot box to elect new parliamentarians, on 1 September in Saxony and Thuringia, and on 22 September in Brandenburg. Many fear that these elections will further weaken Germany's traditional parties, while significantly strengthening the far-right AfD and establishing the freshly-minuted left-populist BSW as a permanent feature of the party landscape.

This European election was the first in which 16-year-olds could vote across all of Germany. This makes Germany one of three EU member states with such a low voting age for European Parliament elections. The others are Austria and Belgium, while in Greece it is 17. This change in the German electoral law was introduced by the ruling coalition and follows a similar lowering of the voting age for regional elections in many but not all *Länder*. Indeed, many young voters who could vote for the first time in the European election will be barred from voting in this autumn's regional elections in Thuringia and Saxony which maintain a higher voting age. The lowering of the voting age for the European election might also ultimately pave the way for a similar move in federal elections, although this would prove more difficult as it would mean changing the constitution. These efforts to reduce the voting age are particularly relevant in light of Germany's ageing population – the median age is currently 45. Allowing a greater share of young voters to participate in elections could well affect the results, albeit in a counter-intuitive manner (see below).

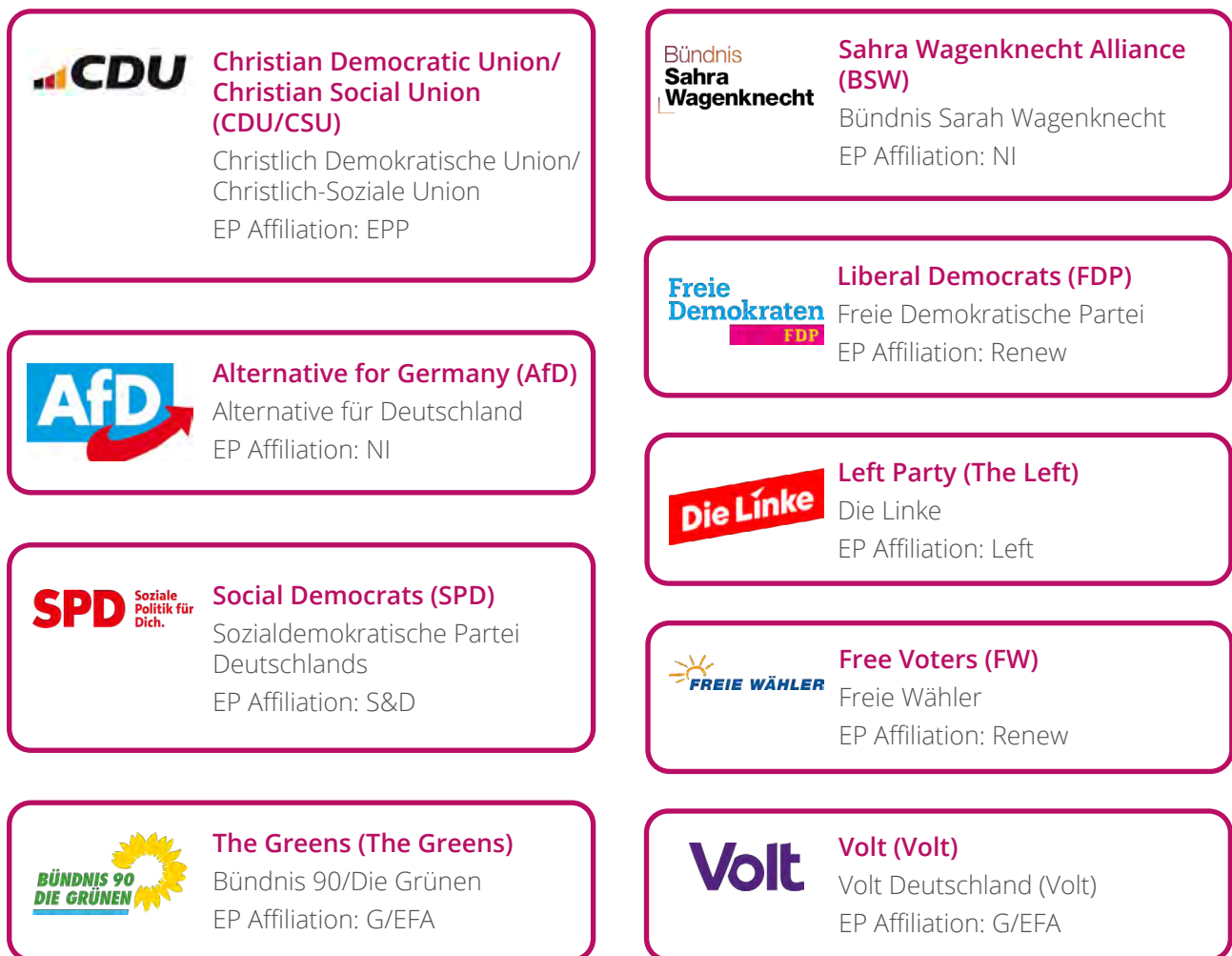
Lastly, the European election in Germany differs from most other elections there in that there is no electoral threshold, – typically set at 5% for federal and state elections – to enter the EP. While Germany used to set a threshold for European elections, this was ruled unconstitutional by the federal constitutional court in Karlsruhe on multiple occasions. While there are plans being drawn up by most mainstream political parties to reintroduce an electoral threshold compatible with the court’s requirements, this did not happen in time for the 2024 election. Hence, unlike in federal elections, voters could give their votes even to relatively small political parties, knowing that they might conceivably win a seat in the European Parliament with Germany’s 96 seats up for grabs.

An electoral campaign which discussed Europe only at the margins

The campaign in Germany was perhaps the least Europeanised one in recent history. This was rather surprising as, on paper, there was significant potential for fighting it on European policies and politics, given that many German candidates are bound to play leading roles at the European level.

Many party programmes included potentially revolutionary proposals for the EU. The Greens called for a "Federal European Republic based on a European Constitution".² Unlike their previous campaign

Figure 1: German political parties and affiliations (Source: Politico)



manifestos, the AfD reverted to a maximalist position, wanting to abolish the EU and replace it with a novel entity focusing narrowly on the economy and national interest.³ While these represent two of the most extreme positions on the EU in party programmes, different parties also had detailed suggestions on more concrete topics, ranging from the establishment of a European army or switching to qualified majority voting on foreign policy issues to proposals for European unemployment insurance. Many of the issues which were ultimately debated the most heavily during the public campaign had a clear European dimension, such as Russia's war against Ukraine and the EU's support for Kyiv or the new Pact on Migration and Asylum.

Many German politicians also played a key role on behalf of their respective party families in pan-European political campaigns and processes. Firstly, the outgoing Commission President and Christian Democratic Union (CDU) politician Ursula von der Leyen sought re-election as Commission President taking the role of the European Peoples' Party's (EPP) lead candidate for the Commission presidency, albeit without seeking a seat in the European Parliament. The Greens' German lead candidate, Terry Reintke, also served as one of two European Greens' candidates in the pan-European campaign. The liberal politician Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann was one of the several lead candidates fielded by Renew. Lastly, the Christian Social Union's (CSU) lead candidate, Manfred Weber, played and will most likely continue to play a key leadership role in the EPP.

However, in the end, this election's core issues, especially peace and security, were debated mainly through a national lens and in relation to domestic political actors, and this was even more striking than in previous elections. The campaign therefore ultimately served to highlight national political issues which are currently perceived as politically salient. Here, both the AfD and BSW emphasised what they perceived as a dangerous national policy of arming Ukraine.

At the same time, the Social Democrats highlighted Chancellor Olaf Scholz's cautious approach to

weapons shipments for Ukraine, thereby avoiding escalation by Russia and preserving peace in Germany by keeping it out of the ongoing war. However, genuinely European issues related to the war, such as EU sanctions or joint arms procurement, were almost entirely absent from public debates. Even parties such as the Greens, who generally focus on climate change, put the issue of domestic security at the heart of their electoral campaign. The party's main electoral poster showed lead candidate Terry Reintke with the slogan "A strong Europe leads to a secure Germany".

But other parties made little use of the often prominent German lead candidates to support their electoral campaigns. This can be illustrated through the electoral posters of both the Conservatives and the Social Democrats. Instead of mainly portraying their lead candidates for the European Parliament, they put national politicians up front. One widely used set of SPD posters featured both the party list's lead candidate Katarina Barley alongside Scholz. Similarly, the CDU featured both Commission President Ursula von der Leyen as well as party leader Friedrich Merz. Much like Scholz, Merz has no intention of leaving national politics for a role at EU level for now. In a way, these electoral posters highlight the dual relevance of the European Parliament and the European Council. More importantly however, it shows that German parties believe that voters do not sufficiently care about European issues or that the politicians shaping European politics are not really relevant for them.

While neither the absence of European issues nor the lack of focus on EP candidates is an entirely novel development in Germany, the contrast is still striking when compared to previous EP elections in the country. One contributory factor may be the collapse of the Spitzenkandidaten (or lead candidate) process for the European Commission presidency. That process had played at least some role in previous electoral campaigns, especially as German-speaking contenders such as Jean-Claude Juncker, Martin Schulz or Frans Timmermans took part in televised debates within Germany.

Both the AfD and the BSW framed European issues through a national lens, prompting all the other parties to eagerly highlight potential solutions at the national level, rather than trying to explain the complexities of decision-making in the EU. A key example of this is migration, a central issue highlighted by the AfD. Whereas mainstream political parties could easily have pointed to the EU's New Pact on Migration and Asylum to provide policy solutions, discussions focused instead on nationally-inspired moves such as the reintroduction of border controls within the Schengen area.

Lastly, this campaign was overshadowed by several political scandals. These mostly affected the AfD's two main candidates, Maximilian Krah and Petr Bystron. Krah's parliamentary assistant, for instance, was arrested on suspicion of spying for China.⁴ In addition, in an interview with an Italian newspaper, Krah refused to acknowledge that all former members of the SS should be considered criminals, which led to important consequences at the European level: the AfD was thrown – mostly due to pressure from the French Rassemblement National – out of the ID group in the European Parliament just before the election. While the party temporarily suspended him from campaigning, he was not officially removed as a candidate. This is probably tied to his success on TikTok, where he targets young voters, in particular. Aside from Krah, there was also a scandal involving the candidate Petr Bystron, who, the Czech Republic alleges, took money from Russian sources.⁵

The campaign was also exceptionally violent this time. A police officer died, following a terrorist knife attack on an Islamophobic rally in Mannheim.⁶ The Social Democratic candidate up for re-election, MEP Matthias Ecke, was also attacked while putting up election posters, leading to his hospitalisation. This and further attacks on campaigners and politicians from various parties affected the public mood ahead of the election in ways that are difficult to map directly onto voting intentions.

The results: A 'midterm election' in disguise?

In terms of voter turnout, this EP election was a success for democracy. At 64.8%, turnout reached an almost historic high, with a higher level achieved only at the first direct European Parliament election in 1979. Turnout was also up 3.4 percentage points on the 2019 election. Although this still pales in comparison with the 76.6% seen at the 2021 federal election, it is a positive sign of voter mobilisation during European elections, as there have never been more voters in Germany choosing their MEPs (given that the 1979 election only took place in what was then West Germany).

In terms of results, there were two clear winners and one main loser amongst the largest political parties when compared to the 2019 election. First, the AfD won 15.9% of the votes, 4.9 percentage points more than in the previous European Parliament election. Second, Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW) received 6.2%, even though the party was only born earlier this year. The biggest losers were the Greens, whose vote share fell by 8.6 percentage points, receiving only 11.9% of the total. It should be noted, however, that their 2019 result of 20.5% represented a historic high at a time when climate change was seen as the most significant political issue by many voters. The Social Democrats suffered small losses, winning 14% of the vote versus 15.8% in 2019, while the Left Party also lost out, mostly because of the BSW decision to split from it.

This picture changes when comparing the results to the 2021 federal election, the focus of most public commentary in Germany. This comparison offers a clear indication that many voters were unhappy with the current traffic light coalition government. From this perspective the opposition parties, namely the centre-right CDU and its Bavarian sister party CSU,⁷ as well as the AfD, made significant gains. 48%⁸ of voters also indicated that they used their vote to voice their dissatisfaction with the current federal government, while 55% stated that domestic politics determined their vote. As such, this Euro-

pean election was largely seen as a midterm federal election - a tendency which could also be observed in other EU member states such as France.

There is one more important aspect that could easily be forgotten amidst the headline results: small and often single-issue political parties also emerged as clear winners. This continues a trend from the 2014 and 2019 elections, which were already fought without an electoral threshold. However, while in 2019 only nine of Germany's seats were occupied by parties which gained less than 5% of the votes, this has now risen to 12 (or 15 if including the Left which has dropped below 5% in 2024). By far the biggest winner of these small parties is the pro-EU political movement VOLT, which now has three seats, up from just one in the previous election.⁹ The successes of small political parties such as VOLT point to the gradual splintering of Germany's party system, as well as to voters' ability to capitalise on the absence of an electoral threshold. Had even an ultra-low threshold of 2% been applied, then only VOLT, The Left and one more political party would have made the cut.

When looking at the issues which influenced voters' choices, then peace, social security and immigration were the most important, relegating the climate emergency to 4th place compared to 2019. This is a likely factor behind the significant losses of the German Greens. It also shows that Russia's war against Ukraine has significantly influenced what voters consider to be the most politically salient issues, all while topics such as healthcare in the context of the Covid pandemic no longer matter for most voters.

The overall results also mask some other electoral shifts which are likely to continue to remain relevant in future. Firstly, these elections are ultimately a sign of broader electoral shifts in Germany. One, there continues to be a clear divide between eastern and western Germany when it comes to the success of populist challenger parties such as the AfD and BSW. The results of the European Parliament elections show that in many parts of eastern Germany, the AfD is now the strongest political party, which

might foreshadow dramatic results in the upcoming Länder elections. At the same time, it is important to highlight that the AfD was still able to make gains across most of western Germany too, although these were smaller than in the East.

Secondly, young voters now exhibit voting behaviour that defies conventional wisdom. Amongst 16–24-year-olds, the AfD succeeded in increasing its vote share by 11 percentage points, while the Greens lost 23 percentage points compared to the 2019 election. What's more, young voters seem much more willing to vote for smaller political parties than the electorate at large. In any case, unlike in 2019 during the height of the Fridays for Future movement, progressive parties such as the Greens could no longer automatically rely on this age group for electoral support and will clearly have to seek out new ways to reach them in future.

Lastly, while the ongoing rise of the AfD is worrying, it should be noted that while their result of 15.9% represents a significant increase over 2019 as well as over the 2021 federal elections, it is still significantly lower than some polls had predicted. Whether this indicates a genuine peak in their support or has been lowered by the set-up of the BSW and the AfD's issues with key candidates remains to be seen.

Just as during the campaign, the election results were mainly debated in the context of German domestic politics. While it did not lead to a political earthquake as in France, conservative politicians such as the Bavarian Prime Minister Markus Söder did call for early federal elections after the obvious defeat of parties forming the current ruling traffic light coalition. The already strained collaboration between the Social Democrats, Greens and Liberals will not have been made easier by the outcome, with each of the trio drawing very different lessons from this election.

In terms of implications for the wider EU, these German elections will undoubtedly bring some change to Brussels. In the European Parliament itself these results ultimately matter when it comes to political

group formation and the wider balance of power. Here, the AfD ultimately decided to exclude Krah from their official EP delegation, yet kept Bystron on the list. While there was an initial belief that this might lead to an eventual return of the party to a reconfigured ID, the AfD instead swiftly tried to form a completely novel political group. Where the new BSW MEPs will find a permanent home also remains to be seen as they are understandably antagonised by the German Left, which is part of the European Left (GUE/NGL). At the same time, the decision by the newly elected VOLT MEPs in Germany and the Netherlands to join the Greens/EFA will at least partially compensate for the reduced numbers of the German delegation within this political group.

Beyond the European Parliament the results will also likely affect Germany's position writ-large. With the current coalition government weakened domestically, this will also affect its power-mongering and positioning in the different Council formations. With the three ruling parties having to position themselves ahead of the regional and federal elections, one can also expect further erratic voting behaviour by Germany in the Council, as we saw with the vote on phasing out internal combustion engine cars, for instance. This means that these European Parliament elections have ultimately weakened the hand of Germany's government within the EU, in stark contrast to some other players such as the current head of the Italian government, Georgia Meloni.

Figure 2: Voting intentions in the EP election in Germany (29 May 2024, data from Euronews)

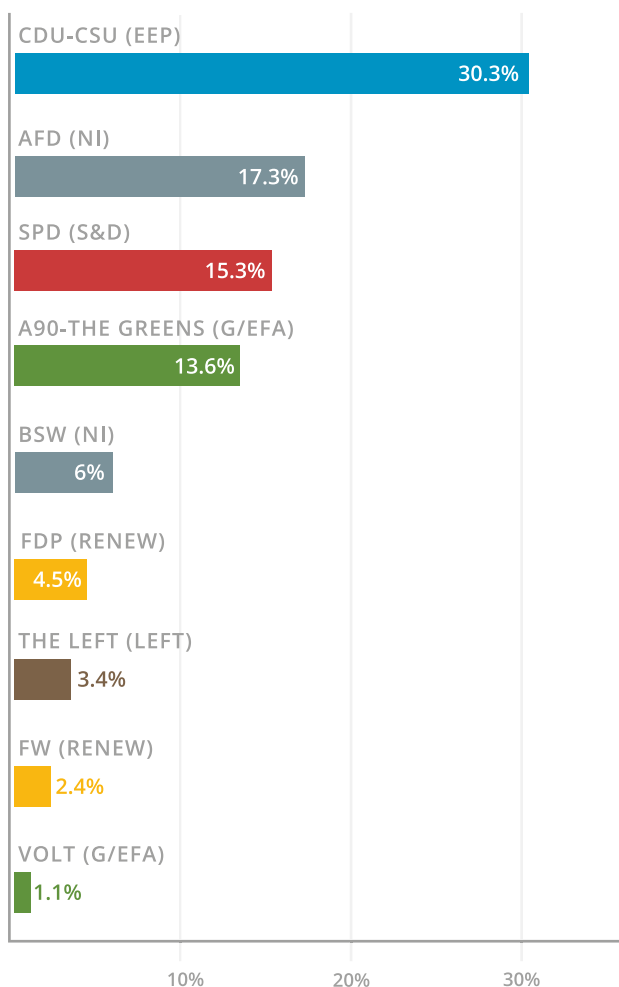
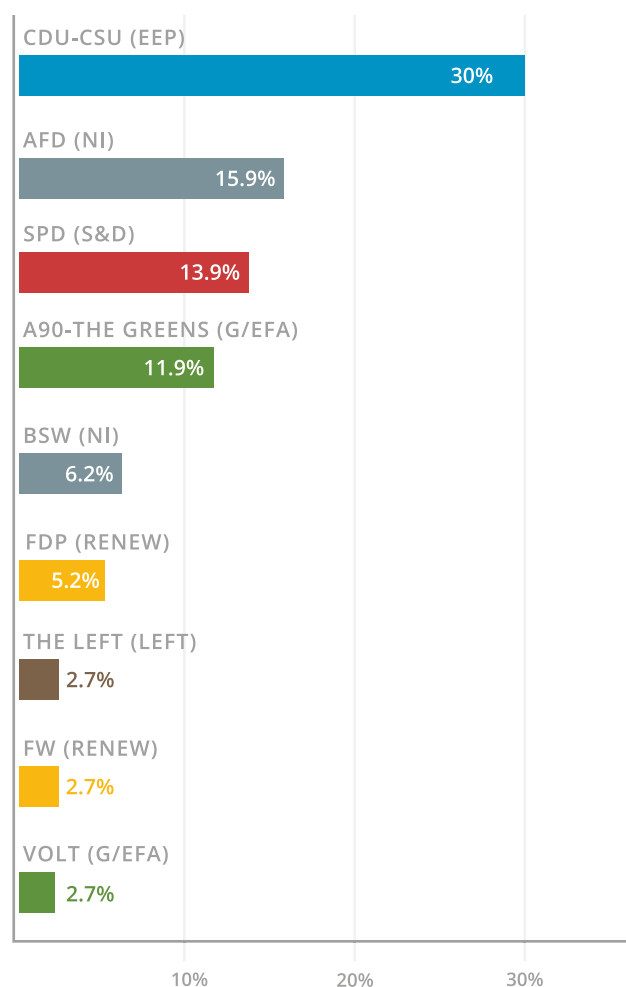


Figure 3: EP election result in Germany (10 June 2024, data from Euronews)



Conclusion

While more voters than ever took part in the 2024 European Parliament election in Germany, the outcome cannot be seen as a wholehearted success for European democracy. Compared to previous election campaigns, there was much less debate around European political issues, with most of it playing out at the national level. Even the results were interpreted solely through a German lens as a "midterm election" judgment on the traffic-light coalition. The EP election result also underlined the further fragmentation of Germany's party political landscape. This, in turn, is bound to affect the EU in ways going way beyond the mere composition of the European Parliament in future, as it points to political shifts which will affect Germany's positioning in a host of different Council of the EU formations where a host of policies are decided.

References

- 1 Given that seats in the European Parliament are assigned to EU member states according to a principle of regressive proportionality, Germany still remains the most under-represented country in the European Parliament when compared to the size of its population.
- 2 Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (2023): Machen, was zählt. Europawahlprogramm 2024, Berlin, S. 89.
- 3 Alternative für Deutschland (2023), Programm der Alternative für Deutschland für die Wahl zum 10. Europäischen Parlament, Berlin, S. 10.
- 4 Christian Fuchs, Astrid Geisler, Holger Stark, Martin Steinghagen, Sascha Venohr: "Mitarbeiter des AfD-Spitzenkandidaten Maximilian Krah festgenommen", Die Zeit, 23.4.2024.
- 5 Andrea Becker, Georg Heil, Markus Pohl: "Russische Einflussoperation: Geldübergabe an Byström im Auto?", Tagesschau.de, 19.4.2024.
- 6 Tagesschau.de: "Polizist nach Messerattacke in Mannheim gestorben", 2.6.2024.
- 7 The CDU and CSU are usually listed as a single electoral bloc given that the CDU competes in 15 of Germany's länder, while the CSU competes in Bavaria.
- 8 All data on voter behaviour such as on key issues or voting by age group is taken from the exit poll conducted for Germany's public Broadcaster ARD by Infratest Dimap.
- 9 Other small parties which again receive seats in the European Parliament are the conservative Free Voters, the satirical Die Partei, the conservative Family Party, the Human Animal Protection party, as well as the Ecological Democratic Party. At the same time, the Pirate Party no longer receives a seat in the European Parliament, while the so-called Party of Progress (a political movement emphasizing the core values of Germany's constitution) gained one seat.

About the author



Daniel Schade is an Assistant Professor at Leiden University and a Policy Fellow at Das Progressive Zentrum. He focuses on questions of European policy-making and the future of parliamentarism. After completing his doctorate at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), he worked at the Vienna School of International Studies, Otto-von-Guericke University, as well as Cornell University.

 @danielschade

 Daniel Schade

About Das Progressive Zentrum

DAS
PROGRESSIVE
ZENTRUM

Das Progressive Zentrum is an independent and non-profit think tank based in Berlin. Since 2007, our research, publications and events have helped stimulate ideas for societal progress, provided guidance for decisive political debates, and facilitated collaborative networks for progressives from across Germany, Europe and North America. We strive for a sustainable society that provides equal and good opportunities for all.

 @DPZ_Berlin

 Das Progressive Zentrum

 @dpz_berlin

 @dpzberlin.bsky.social

www.progressives-zentrum.org

The return of a clear right-left divide in Italy

Luca Barana, Istituto Affari Internazionali

Introduction

The elections for the European Parliament (EP) on 8 and 9 June in Italy largely confirmed the political balance of forces established during the October 2022 general election and strengthened the leadership of Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni. The hard-right Brothers of Italy, members of the European Conservatives and Reformists in the European Parliament (ECR) and senior partner in the ruling coalition, comfortably won with 28.8% of the votes, slightly more than what had been expected in the polls. They therefore gained 24 of the 76 seats assigned to Italy in the EP. Their performance stood out dramatically in comparison to the 6% that the party obtained at the previous European elections in 2019, cementing the tight grip that Meloni now has on Italian politics. It also showcases that her tenure in government has not brought any significant political downside.

Unlike other European leaders in member states like France, Germany and Spain, Meloni topped the polls, legitimising her prominent role within the European Council. A role that she will still struggle to translate into concrete influence, as shown by the negotiations on the EU's top jobs.

On the contrary, the vote was a crushing defeat for Matteo Salvini's League (member of the rival far-right Identity and Democracy group in the EP), which in 2019 had come top with 34% of the votes. In June it got only 9% of the votes, gaining 8 seats. It was also overtaken by the other partner in the ruling coalition, the resurgent Forza Italia (member of the European People's Party - EPP), which obtained 9.6% of the votes and 9 seats.

The elections also signalled a return to a more traditional left-right cleavage within the political system, with opposition parties on the centre-left faring

Figure 1: Voting intentions for the EP election in Italy (29 May 2024, Data by Euronews)

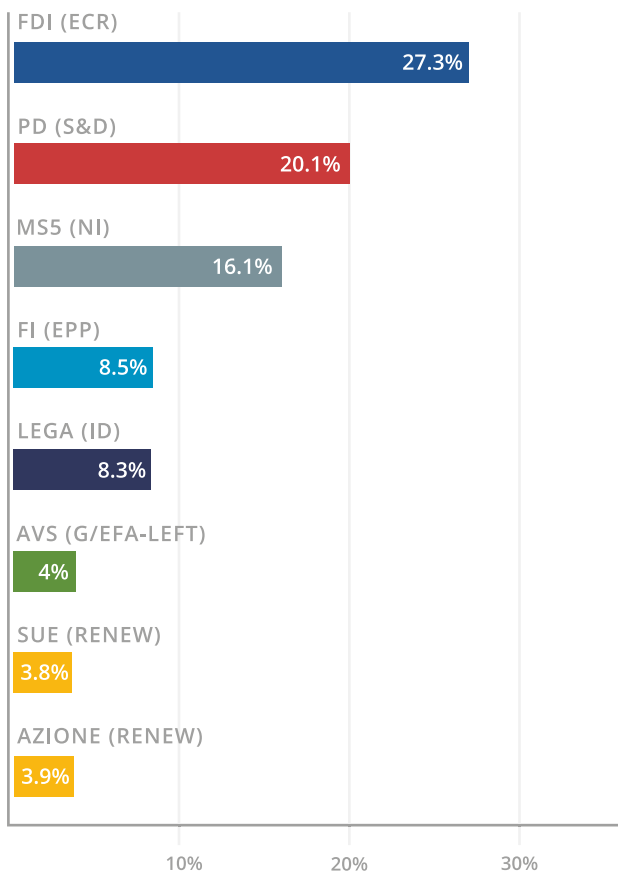
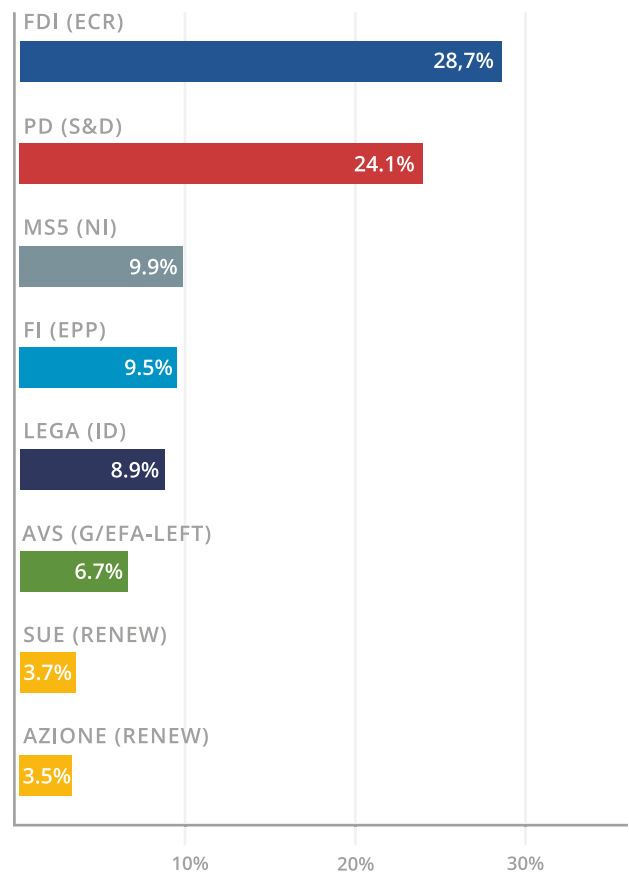


Figure 2: EP election results in Italy (10 June 2024, Data by Euronews)



better than predicted by opinion polls. The Democratic Party (PD - member of the Socialists & Democrats in the EP) became the second political force, with 24.1%, which translates into 21 seats, and will send the biggest national contingent within the S&D group at the EP. Also, the Green and Left Alliance (Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra, AVS, members of the Green/Left) obtained a surprisingly positive result with 5 seats and 6.8% of the vote, entering the EP after having missed the electoral threshold of 4% in 2019 because of divisions among alliance members.

The two centrist liberal lists that entered the race this year, United States of Europe and Action, both affiliated to Renew, ignored the lesson that a common electoral ticket would boost their chances. They ran separately and, as a result, both missed the threshold and will not send any representatives to the EP. The Five Star Movement (M5S, non-aligned in the EP) led by former Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, experienced a disappointing outcome. Their electoral bet on a pacifist stance on Ukraine didn't succeed, as they scored a disappointing 10%, down from the 15% that the polls were suggesting only one month before. They will send 8 representatives to the EP.

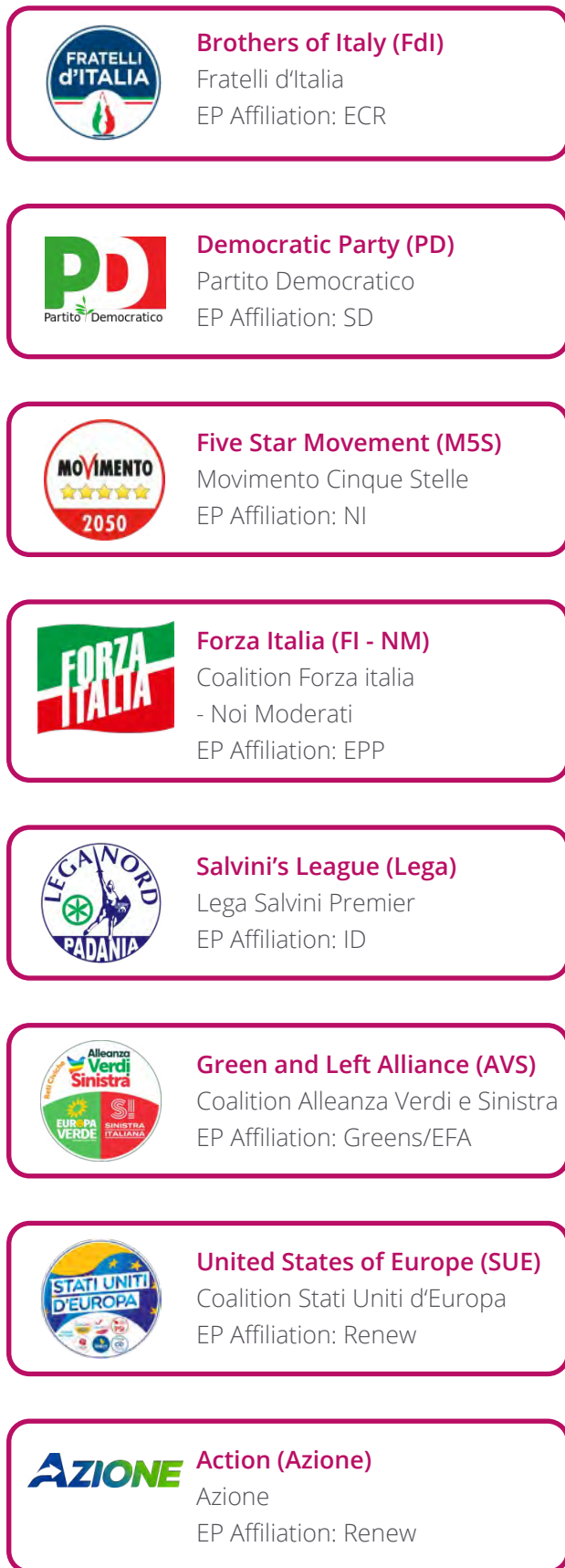
The turnout was historically low at 49.7%. It is the first time in Italy's republican history that a general or EP election had a turnout of less than 50%. Stark differences emerged among constituencies where the European elections were taking place simultaneously with local elections and those where the only available vote was for the EP, especially in the south. Meloni soon blamed the low turnout on alienation perceived by citizens vis-à-vis the EU.¹ Actually, Italy remains a mildly Eurosceptic country, with only 46% of Italians viewing EU membership in a positive light.² However, a shrinking turnout is becoming an established trait in elections in Italy.³

The context of the elections: from Draghi to Meloni

Since the last European elections in 2019, Italy has gone through the same systemic shocks as its European partners, namely the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. The pandemic has hit the country hard, with Italy's economy being severely affected. However, it has rebounded better than others, also thanks to expansive fiscal policies and the first disbursements from the Recovery and Resilience Fund (RRF).⁴ The Russian war against Ukraine was a wake-up call for a country heavily dependent on Russian gas imports and for national parties that had cultivated political links with Moscow's regime.⁵ Rome reacted quickly by endorsing political, financial and military support for Ukraine's resistance.

The initial consequences of the war were managed by Mario Draghi's government, supported by a broad parliamentary coalition. Meloni remained staunchly in the Opposition, while progressively embracing a more supportive attitude towards European and NATO responses to Russia. Her decision paid off at the general elections in October 2022, when a right-wing coalition led by Brothers of Italy, and composed of the League and Forza Italia (who had both supported Draghi), took power, with Meloni becoming the first female prime minister in Italian history. The coalition has proved to be pretty cohesive in its first 20 months in power, despite the three major parties belonging to different political groups in the EP. Their task was also facilitated by a weakened opposition, which has been going through a significant reconstruction, especially when it comes to the centre-left Democratic Party. Under the new leadership of Elly Schlein, the PD has turned left and has been trying to find common ground with M5S. The results of the European elections will have implications for building a centre-left alternative at domestic level, as the PD is now clearly back in the lead.

Figure 1: Italian political parties, alliances and affiliations



Institutional constraints and the personalisation of politics

The electoral campaign for the European elections began quite late, as party programmes and lists were presented only in late April. This can be partially explained by a string of regional elections in the first few months of 2024 in Sardinia, Abruzzo and Basilicata, which preoccupied the parties. The centre-left victory in Sardinia and the centre-right confirmation in the other two elections were interpreted as a test for Meloni's government. The media and political parties also framed the EP elections as midterm elections. At her campaign launch in Pescara in April, Meloni adopted this narrative, saying she was asking Italian voters to express their satisfaction with the government.⁶

In Italy, the electoral law for the EP elections is purely proportional, with a 4% national threshold and great importance given to votes for individual candidates within party lists.⁷ These institutional constraints have two implications. First, the proportional system does not require the formation of any coalition, which means smaller parties are incentivised to campaign for themselves.⁸ The electoral campaign has thus deepened the rifts among coalition partners, especially within the ruling majority. The affiliation to different political groups at the European level has gained fresh importance, with Salvini's League staking out a much more Eurosceptic approach, in line with the ID message, vis-à-vis Meloni's attempt to institutionalise and normalise her own hardline conservative view on the need to profoundly change Europe from within. The rivalry has been particularly stark between the League's Euroscepticism and the traditional pro-European message of Forza Italia, as the two partners have been competing head to head for a long time in the polls.

The second implication was the pronounced personalisation of the campaign.⁹ The weight of a can-

didate-oriented vote has been enhanced by the division of the Italian territory into just five broad electoral constituencies, each one comprising multiple regions.¹⁰ Party leaders – including high level personalities such as the Prime Minister Meloni and Foreign Affairs Minister Antonio Tajani (Forza Italia) – ran for the EP in top-of-the-list positions, while stating that they would not sit in Parliament if elected. Meloni ran in all five constituencies, further stressing her direct connection with voters by inviting them to use her first name "Giorgia" in the ballot box and collecting more than two million personal votes. Former EP President Tajani ran in four constituencies out of five.

The same decision was adopted – with mixed results – by other leaders, such as Carlo Calenda (Azione, five out of five), Matteo Renzi (United States of Europe, four out of five) and Elly Schlein (PD, two out of five). Salvini opted not to run, but his name appeared on the League's electoral logo. In the M5S, party leader and former Italian premier Giuseppe Conte decided not to run, while still dominating the party's campaign. The PD's good showing was also partly down to the choice of well-known local politicians.

Several parties decided to work with independent candidates, who would be able to draw personal votes to their lists. Some of them ended up acting as trend-setters during the campaign. Former Army General Roberto Vannacci stood out in League lists, setting the tone for the campaign with its aggressive hard-right message on values, minorities' rights and immigration. He overshadowed his own party leader and obtained more than 500,000 personal votes. The centre-left also turned to independent candidates: the PD elected anti-war voices from civil society like Marco Tarquinio and Cecilia Strada, while AVS enlisted Ilaria Salis, a political activist incarcerated in Hungary, so as to characterise the party's campaign and denounce Budapest's breach of the rule of law. A move that proved successful.

A domestic debate around different ideas of Europe

In such a personalised environment, the content of parties' political programmes and the actual campaign conducted by the candidates grew increasingly detached. Election manifestos reflected clear distinctions in proposals and principles on EU policy areas as diverse as the ecological transition, European defence or migration. However, day-to-day campaigning was dominated by domestic developments. These embraced heated debates on constitutional reform or accusations against the government of censoring public TV or limiting abortion rights. Italian public opinion has grown accustomed to political polarisation revolving around party leaders and leading candidates that makes any discussion about serious European policy issues less and less palatable for them.¹¹ Paradoxically, the campaign that played the most on European issues was the Eurosceptic one conducted by Salvini's League.

This does not mean that a debate around diverging ideas of Europe and future relations between Italy and the EU was completely absent.¹² However, political parties usually filtered their views through the lens of domestic politics and relied on simpler messages, setting out their rival perspectives on the EU. One striking trait of this election campaign, especially compared to earlier ones, has been the almost complete absence of calls for Italy to leave the euro or the EU, even from the most outspoken Eurosceptic movements. This trend may have been driven by the innovative response that the EU gave Italy during the pandemic, through instruments like SURE (to reduce unemployment) and the RRF (to support the economy post-pandemic), which may have mitigated the country's persistent Euroscepticism.¹³ However, these EU programmes barely figured in the campaign, as parties and indeed the electorate seem to have taken them for granted.

Meloni's Brothers of Italy promoted a confederal vision of the EU, based on the principle of subsidiarity

and denouncing the concentration of power in the hands of a European Commission "without democratic legitimacy". Her party warned against Brussels overreach in sectors such as competitiveness and fiscal governance. However, Meloni also pointed to a "European common destiny", especially via a common security and defence policy.¹⁴ She championed the concept of changing the EU from within, distancing herself from the more explicit Euroscepticism of Salvini's League. She convinced her electorate that the EU can be an instrument to promote national interests on the global stage, if managed properly, while reassuring certain economic sectors, such as farmers and small and medium enterprises (SMEs), that the government would protect their interests against Brussels "excesses".

Mainstream parties on the left and right of the political spectrum advanced the vision of a more federalist Europe. Forza Italia on the right reiterated its traditional pro-European message based on freedom, security and Christian identity. PD and AVS on the left advocated for further European integration, favouring the retention of joint economic tools post-RRF. Broadly speaking, leftist parties depicted the image of an EU keener on social and green issues. However, the PD campaign was mainly driven by domestic promises, such as buttressing the public health system and introducing a minimum wage, policy spheres where member states hold competencies, not the EU.

The tone of the campaign was set by the slogans adopted by the parties, rather than by specific proposals, from the highly critical "Less Europe, more Italy" of the League to the proactive "The Europe we want" of the PD. But no slogan proved as successful as "With Giorgia, Italy is changing Europe", which encapsulated both the personalised nature of Meloni's campaign and her intent to influence the EU from within.

Implications for the next EU institutional cycle in key policy areas

Italian party manifestos framed the Green Deal very much in accordance with the positions of their EU political families. The parties in government were as one in their criticism of EU rules on the green transition as an obstacle to competitiveness and as a source of regulatory burden, especially for SMEs that still constitute the backbone of several economic sectors in Italy. The three ruling parties, in particular Brothers of Italy and the League, also morphed their criticism against an "ideological" green transition into a defence of traditional values espoused by the Italian right, like home and car ownership, in order to cling on to their traditional electorate's support. On the contrary, the centre-left supported the need to strengthen the Green Deal through vast programmes of public investments and boosting its social dimension, even if highlighting the costs of the transition was an electoral gamble.¹⁵ Their support for green policies may well have helped the PD and AVS attract substantial numbers of young voters, as championing green policies increasingly resonates with Italian youth.¹⁶

Italy is likely to push for complementing the Green Deal with industrial and competitiveness policies that protect its manufacturing. Delaying and watering down the most impactful measures of the Green Deal could also be one of the policy areas where Brothers of Italy could cooperate on a case-by-case basis with the EPP, and where Meloni could attempt to exert her growing influence in the Council.

A similar pattern of selective cooperation could be followed on Ukraine and on the broader issue of common European defence. However, Meloni faces an uphill challenge in making the case for aligning with the European powers-that-be on Ukraine because of widespread fears of a military escalation among the Italian population and deepening rifts within the ruling majority, which were further ex-

posed by the election campaign.¹⁷ Salvini's campaign progressively became more outspoken on Ukraine, especially after Macron's and Stoltenberg's support for the use of Western-provided weapons into Russia's territory. Salvini harshly criticised 'plans' for a "European army" and culminated by labelling Macron "a criminal".¹⁸ This rhetorical escalation can be read as a tactical shift to distance the party from its partners in government, even though it proved unsuccessful in terms of electoral results, but also to refurbish the League's credentials on Euroscepticism and thus re-align with its traditional partners within ID.

Other movements made peace and disarmament one of their major electoral cards: M5S even included the word "peace" in its own symbol on the ballot paper. AVS also promoted a pro-peace platform, usually combining the demand for peace negotiations on Ukraine with the denunciation of Israel's retaliatory war in Gaza. The PD adhered to the European Socialists' line of supporting Ukraine to achieve a "just peace", but without concretely specifying what it means, as the party's programme does not pinpoint Ukraine's territorial integrity as an explicit condition.¹⁹ While it will not dent the party's pro-Ukraine approach, the inclusion in its lists of Tarquinio and Strada, civil society personalities who have clearly stated their opposition to prolonging military assistance to Kyiv, has also created an undoubted embarrassment for Schlein's leadership.

Overall, Meloni's personal commitment to Ukraine should reassure the allies on Italy's position – for the time being. However, the US elections might prove to be a turning point: in the event of Donald Trump's victory, Meloni will probably be forced to choose whether to side with an isolationist, but ideologically kindred, US administration, or with Italy's EU partners. Also, the opposition to Kaja Kallas' choice as High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy is a signal that the Italian government's declared commitment to a common European line can simply be overtaken by sheer political calculation.

The prime minister's strategy of building up her personal standing internationally seems to have borne fruit on migration, as the government successfully managed to reduce its political salience in the campaign. While the need for a European policy on irregular migration and asylum has dominated the agenda during the negotiations on the New Pact²⁰, it has been virtually absent from the electoral debate, until the last week when Meloni strategically visited Albania to promote the government's commitment to outsource migration management. The elections are unlikely to change Italy's approach to migration: the parties in government will still push for outsourcing asylum, cooperating on selected legislative packages at EU level with the traditional EP majority. At the same time, support for the New Pact might be too big an obstacle for Brothers of Italy to cross within the ECR and in view of potential – but unlikely – cooperative attempts with ID.

Finally, all parties elected to the EP uniformly and decisively reject austerity policies. Fiscal governance will likely be where the mildly cooperative attitude of the Italian government will be tested the most. Headlines in parties' manifestos such as "The end of austerity policies" (League), "Moving beyond austerity" (Brothers of Italy), "Stop austerity" (M5S) or "Europe against austerity" (AVS) underline how pervasive this political narrative is in Italian politics. The same could be said about how the PD cast austerity as a source of support for the right because of its detrimental economic consequences. The implementation of the reformed Growth and Stability Pact is thus likely to provoke a dispute between Italy and the EU.

Conclusion

The renewed left-right cleavage emerging from the EP elections at the national level will influence Italy's relations with the EU and coalition choices in the EP. Meloni has already had an impact in the sense that she successfully steered Europe towards the right on migration, with backing from the EPP.²¹ The Italian government's stance in the Council is unlikely to change significantly after these elections. The prime minister is one of the few European leaders to have emerged strengthened from the polls and will likely carry on leveraging her support for current priorities – assistance to Ukraine and a common European defence – against concessions on Brussels perceived overreach in other sensitive dossiers for Italy, such as industrial policy and the "costly" green transition. This balancing act will be put to the test on fiscal matters, where a confrontation between the Italian position and other European countries (the "frugals") and the Commission is most likely to emerge. Another contentious area is likely to be the rule of law, even if the Commission seems to have stayed its hand on (alleged) Italian government restrictions on media freedom.²¹ Meloni may have been isolated in the top jobs wrangling, but is still demanding a high-profile portfolio for Italy in the next Commission, matching the electoral successes of the ECR.²³

Speculation that the ECR – or Brothers of Italy on its own – could join a new EP majority seems more unlikely to come to pass due to the election results that have confirmed the traditional majority of pro-European political forces, even if in reduced proportions, and appealed to foreign observers more than Italian voters. Italian mainstream media enthusiastically covered the topic²⁴, but typically filtering it through a domestic lens, applying how Italy's parliamentary system plays out while bypassing the role of the Council in policymaking entirely, so as to make European politics more comprehensible to Italian voters. Meloni has strategically kept her cards close to her chest during the campaign and will probably try to steer ECR towards a case-by-case support for

specific legislative packages up for debate in the next EP, choosing her battles selectively.

This potential case-by-case cooperation by ECR is likely to be staunchly opposed by the PD, which as the biggest contingent in the S&D group will drive it further away from any form of cooperation with the right. The Socialists are the only political group within the traditional governing EP majority where an Italian party has any significant influence, as Forza Italia has less clout inside the EPP (especially in comparison to other powerful parties in Germany and Spain) and as Renew has no representatives elected in Italy. Overall, Italian relations with the EU will continue to be driven by national politics after these European elections.

References

- 1 Ansa, "Europee, Meloni vola al 29% e blinda il governo ma il Pd insegue", 10 June 2024, https://www.ansa.it/europee_2024/notizie/2024/06/10/meloni-affluenza-bassa-segnoche-ue-e-lontana-dai-cittadini_fae1f9df-7760-4b69-8d97-5b4f0c48f2d1.html.
- 2 European Union (2024), EP Spring 2024 Survey: Use your vote - Countdown to the European elections – Country Factsheets - Italy, Brussels, p. 3, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3272>.
- 3 Ruffino, Lorenzo, "L'ennesimo record negativo dell'affluenza al voto", *Pagella Politica*, 10 June 2024, <https://pagellapolitica.it/articoli/record-negativo-affluenza-elezioni-europee-2024>.
- 4 Arnold, Martin, "Southern growth spurt creates two-speed eurozone economy", *Financial Times*, 3 April 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/134b686d-1fe9-4dff-90d7-acc257e-d672a>.
- 5 Gagliardi, Andrea, "Lega-Russia Unita, cosa c'è nell'accordo di collaborazione ora rinnegato", *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 3 April 2024, <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/League-russia-unita-cosa-c-e-nell-accordo-collaborazione-ora-rinnegato-AFC76AID>.
- 6 Meloni, Giorgia, "Pescara, il mio intervento alla conferenza programmatica di @FratelliItalia. Collegatevi", X, @Giorgia-Meloni, 28 April 2024.
- 7 Parlamento Italiano, "Sintesi del sistema elettorale per il Parlamento europeo", (accessed 18 June 2024), <https://leg16.camera.it/561?appro=856>.
- 8 Emanuele, Vincenzo; De Sio, Lorenzo (2024), "Chi potrà cantare vittoria alle europee? Fattori strutturali e aspettative dei partiti", Rome: Centro Italiano Studi Elettorali, <https://cise.luiss.it/cise/2024/05/28/europee-2024-chi-potra-cantare-vittoria-fattori-strutturali-e-aspettative-dei-partiti/>.
- 9 For a definition of personalization, refer to: Garzia, Diego (2017), "Personalization of Politics Between Television and the Internet: Leader Effects in the 2013 Italian Parliamentary Election", *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, Volume 14, Number 4, p. 403.
- 10 Cataldi, Matteo (2024), "Verso le Europee: quanto contano i candidati, e il ruolo a sorpresa dei 'signori delle preferenze'", Rome: Centro Italiano Studi Elettorali, <https://cise.luiss.it/cise/2024/04/24/verso-le-europee-quanto-contano-i-candidati-e-il-ruolo-a-sorpresa-dei-signori-delle-preferenze/>.
- 11 Interview with expert on political communication, 28 May 2024.
- 12 Interview with foreign correspondent, 5 June 2024.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Meloni, Giorgia, op. cit.
- 15 Interview with expert on political communication, 28 May 2024.
- 16 Interview with campaign manager, 23 May 2024.
- 17 Interview with expert on political communication, 28 May 2024.
- 18 Ansa, "Salvini: ,Macron criminale e instabile, vada lui in guerra", 7 June 2024, https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/politica/2024/06/07/salvini-macron-criminale-e-instabile-vada-lui-in-guerra-_01f2e091-35e7-4aed-9560-12e53c305a53.html.
- 19 Democratic Party (2024), "L'Europa che vogliamo – Manifesto elettorale", Rome, p. 45.
- 20 European Commission (2024), Pact on Migration and Asylum - A common EU system to manage migration, Brussels, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum_en.
- 21 Bonomi, Matteo, Pirozzi, Nicoletta (2024), "Turning right: Italy's political landscape and EU elections", Barcelona: CIDOB, p. 84.
- 22 Goujard, Clothilde, "Von der Leyen buries report slamming Italy as she seeks Meloni's vote", *Politico*, 16 June 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/ursula-von-der-leyen-italy-rome-commission-president-giorgia-meloni-elections/>.
- 23 Kazmin, Amy et al., "Giorgia Meloni's hard-right European group claims a top EU job", *Financial Times*, 19 June 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/48c40ca7-c0e1-438b-99a4-dd70884cde8>.
- 24 Interview with Italian journalist, 4 June 2024.

About the author



Luca Barana is a Senior fellow at Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). His current research at IAI focuses on EU's migration policies, the role of migration in EU's external action and Italy's foreign policy, and European political dynamics. After graduating in European Studies at the University of Studies of Turin, he has been Junior Visiting Fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations (London/Turin) and Program Manager at the Centre for African Studies in Turin. He has been Coordinator of the Task Force 10 on Migration of the T20 – Italy 2021. He has recently edited the volume "Moving towards Europe", which analyses migratory drivers and fragmented EU-bound migratory trajectories in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

 @LucaBarana

 Luca Barana

About Istituto Affari Internazionali



Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. The Institute is part of a vast international network, and interacts and cooperates with the government and its ministries, European and international institutions, universities, major national economic actors, the media and the most authoritative international think tanks.

 @IAIonline

 IAI - Istituto Affari Internazionali

 @iai.insta

www.iai.it/en

Poland is back at the European table

Maria Skóra, Das Progressive Zentrum

Introduction

The 2024 European elections took place exactly 20 years after Poland joined the EU. But the mood in the country this year was not exactly Euro-enthusiastic, let alone celebratory, with increasing scepticism about the European Green Deal and the New Pact on Migration and Asylum. In addition, this year's election in Poland was tainted by the security threats coming from the East.

While European elections have always been "second order", the increasing political polarisation in Poland has put the spotlight this time even more strongly on domestic issues, as yet another platform to express partisan affiliation. And even more than in previous elections the European Union (EU) was debated from a perspective of national interest, in particular controlling immigration, building up the armed forces and protecting the competitiveness of Polish agriculture. The election served as a proxy for garnering and measuring political support at home. The result cemented the stalemate between Donald Tusk, leader of the Civic Platform (PO) and current prime minister, and Jarosław Kaczyński, leader of the Law and Justice Party (PiS). The outcome not only determines the distribution of seats in the European Parliament (EP), of which Poland has 53, but can also be interpreted through the lens of the continuing domestic power struggle. It can be seen either as a sign of consolidating the power of the *Koalicja Obywatelska* (Civic Coalition, which includes parties which are part of EPP, Renew and the European Greens) and delivering the final blow to the United Right coalition, founding parties of which belong to the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) in the EP; or as a proof of the current coalition's weak governing capacity and the persistent pole position of the PiS party in national politics. Other parties and election committees, such as *Trzecia Droga* (Third Way, part of EPP and Renew), *Lewica* (The Left, part of the Socialists & Democrats) and the far-right *Konfederacja* (Confederation, non-aligned in the EP), were sidelined by the continuing clash between the two heavy-weight rivals.

Election marathon amidst farmers' protests and security threats

Since February 2022, politics in Poland have been heavily affected by the Russian war against Ukraine. It has taken a direct toll on the country, which has faced diverse challenges, ranging from receiving millions of Ukrainian refugees¹, grappling with several new security threats from Russia, mostly due to armed conflict in Poland's neighbourhood, political conflicts around food security and the import of Ukrainian grain, as well as unexpected budget challenges over providing direct and indirect aid to Ukraine. Other consequential developments that occurred in the run-up to the EP elections were farmers' protests against the European Green Deal, and mounting tensions due to migrant pressures at the Polish-Belarusian border.

The European election was another milestone in the election marathon that started in October 2023 with the Polish parliamentary elections, followed by regional ones in April 2024. This race will conclude in late spring 2025 with the presidential ballot. This continuous campaign mode fuels the fierce political rivalry between PiS, which is clinging to the vestiges of power, and KO, led by Civic Platform (PO), which is trying to win back both the legislative and the executive in the country. This permanent mobilisation might eventually result in voter fatigue. The record-high voter turnout in the 2023 parliamentary elections² might have been a one-time mobilisation effort, instead of a permanent change in political practice, as many would hope. The decade-long feud between Tusk and Kaczyński has long frustrated Poles, who long for a generational change in Polish politics, but see no alternatives emerging.³

The big four: Green Deal, Migration, Security, Federalisation

Owing to the nationwide regional elections in April, the European campaign properly started only in May. The election campaign's manifesto dimension was completely overshadowed by the make-up of lists. Political parties only used social media to a very limited extent: paid advertisements had a small reach and relied on tiny budgets.⁴ Instead, all parties prioritised direct outreach by canvassing and organising local events.

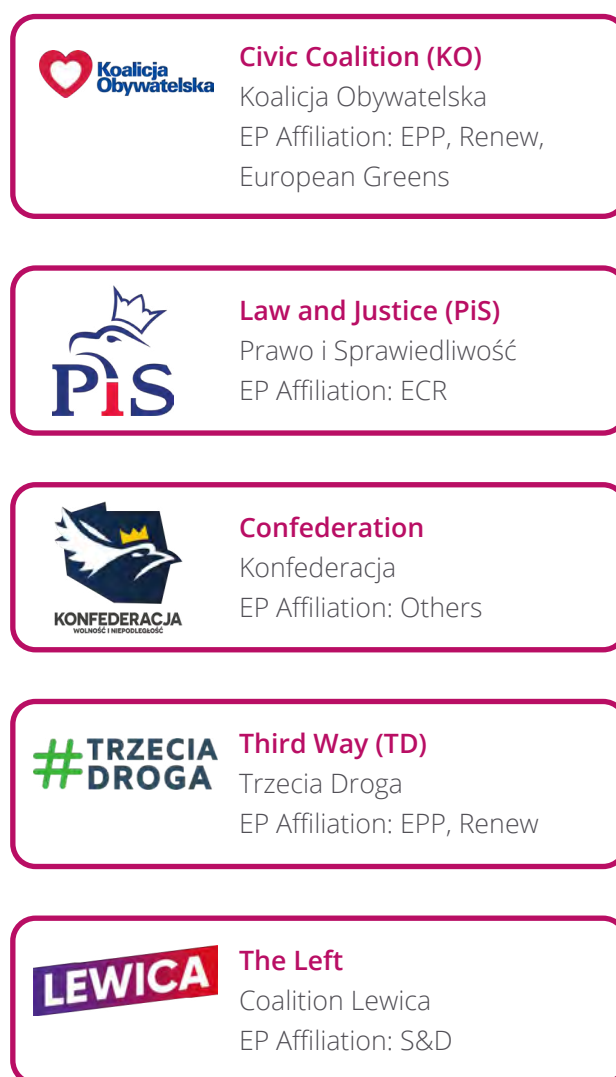
The main cleavage in the Polish political landscape in the EU elections – like in many other EU countries – ran along the line of pro-European vs. Eurosceptic attitudes. The centre right, the liberals, the greens, and the left presented a rather positive narrative of the EU, stressing the advantages of Poland's EU membership, such as security back-up in times of war, tackling the climate challenge, and financial benefits. In the opposite corner were the national-conservatives and the far-right. During the 2024 campaign, none of the parties raised the case for 'Polexit', but they did embark on a pessimistic rhetoric about the EU, emphasising the need to defend Poland's sovereignty, security, and the financial interests of Polish citizens.

The European Green Deal, migration and security issues dominated as election issues. After the wave of farmers' protests, which ran from March till May, the Green Deal became a source of discontent in Poland. The political responsibility for implementing this policy was attributed to the European Commissioner for Agriculture, Janusz Wojciechowski of PiS – even by his own party. The governing coalition, KO, adopted an ambivalent stance towards the Green Deal during this campaign. While they recognised the need to respond to climate change and adapt agricultural policies to new challenges, they, at the same time, blamed the PiS for the flawed design of the Green Deal. Green policies were also a hallmark

of *Third Way* (Renew and EPP) and *The Left* (S&D), yet the polarising potential surrounding the topic toned down their pro-climate rhetoric. This ambiguity reflects the general mood in Polish society: Poles generally support climate-friendly policies, yet they are extremely critical of the European Green Deal.⁵

Another topic exploited in this campaign was migration. It took over public debate shortly before the election, fuelled by media reports about a Polish soldier on duty, who was stabbed to death by a migrant attempting to cross the border from Belarus.⁶

Figure 1: Polish political parties, alliances and affiliations (Source: Politico)



This only aggravated both the moral panic against migrants as well as the fear of an escalating hybrid war with the Kremlin and its allies. Here the PiS party and KO united in rejecting the New Pact on Migration and Asylum.⁷ As a party leader and prime minister, Donald Tusk continuously criticised the Migration Pact's relocation plans for non-European migrants, blaming the previous United Right government led by the PiS for failing to protect Poland's interests in Brussels. The far-right *Confederation* highlighted the alleged adverse effects of the Pact, explaining that this would result in increased migration pressure due to the acceptance of non-European migrants into the EU and the introduction of relocation quotas. This far-right messaging reflects the overall mood: Poles are reluctant to let the migrants trapped at the border with Belarus into the country. In 2021 almost six in ten respondents thought the migrants arriving at the Belarus border should not be allowed to apply for asylum in Poland, and this view became increasingly popular.⁸

In addition, two other contextual issues echoed in this election campaign. First, the attempted assassination of Robert Fico, the prime minister of Poland's neighbour Slovakia⁹; and second, the defection to Belarus of a high-ranking Polish judge with access to confidential data. This resulted in all parties prioritising security, both in the military sense of protecting the eastern border from potential harmful actions from Moscow and migrants, and domestically, of countering espionage. Finally, potential institutional reforms of the EU, especially a muted change to veto rights in the Council was perceived - especially by the parties on the right of the political spectrum - as a threat to Poland's sovereignty. Only the left argued against the veto right and for deeper integration. Interestingly, apart from the liberal *Third Way*, no-one advocated for the introduction of the Euro.

A symbolic victory for Tusk – but the real winner is the far-right

The national rules on European elections in Poland establish a preferential voting system based on 13 constituencies, an electoral threshold of 5% and a legal voting age of 18. In total, there were 11 political parties, coalitions, or committees of voters, which registered their lists for European elections - seven of them in all constituencies.¹¹ The five main competitors were all election alliances of political parties, some even aligned across different groups in the EP (*Civic Coalition*, *Third Way*).

One month before the election, voter preferences on average reflected the composition of the Polish parliament.¹² PiS and KO were running neck and neck (31% versus 30.4%), followed by the liberal-conservative *Third Way* (10.2%), the far-right *Confederation* (9.5%), and *The Left* (8.7%), with 7.7% undecided.¹³ Other parties failed to reach the 5% threshold.

The actual results varied to some extent from that early prognosis. Whereas the governing coalition KO won by the skin of their teeth against the conservative PiS and their junior coalition partner *Suwerenna Polska* (37.06% vs. 36.16%), there was a serious reshuffle among the second-tier parties. *Third Way* (Renew and EPP) suffered significant losses (getting just 6.91% of the votes) and *The Left* (left/S&D) also under-performed (6.3%). Reflecting the overall trend in the EU, the far-right *Confederation* took third place on the podium, making significant gains compared to 2019 (12.08% vs. 4.55%). As a result, the 53-strong cohort of Polish MEPs will comprise: 23 going to the EPP, 20 to the ECR, three to S&D, and one to Renew. It is yet to be seen which group the six MEPs of the far-right *Confederation* will join.¹⁴

The fierce competition between the current and former government camps may have remained inconclusive, but Tusk managed to mobilise more

Figure 2: Voting intentions for the EP election in Poland (29 May 2024, Data by Euronews)

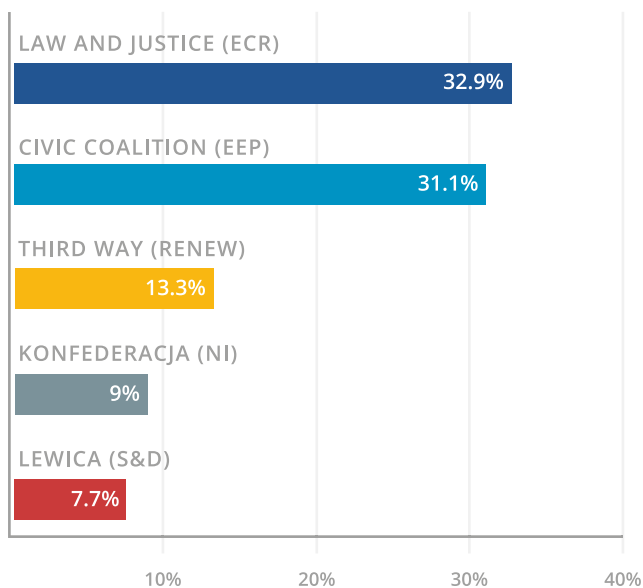
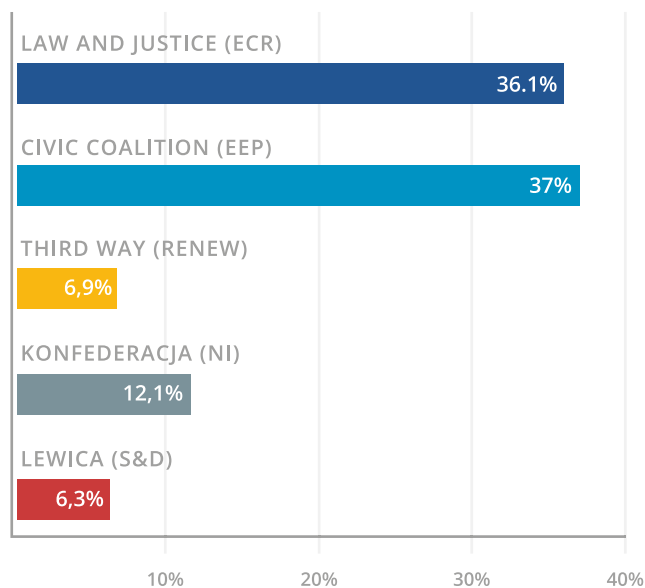


Figure 3: EP election results in Poland (10 June 2024, Data by Euronews)



voters, cannibalising the electorate of *Third Way* and *The Left*, emerging finally able to declare a symbolic victory over PiS. Perhaps a tactical vote against the PiS party convinced some voters to support the strongest opponent of the previous government. As a result, the new player in Polish politics, *Third Way*, failed to solidify their place in the political landscape. The left's poor result eroded even further their leverage in the governing coalition as the smallest and weakest partner. Only the nationalist far-right had reasons to celebrate. However, the Polish political scene remains dominated by the KO-PiS duopoly, accounting for as much as just over 73% of the votes.

The 2024 result is difficult to compare with that of 2019, as different election committees were registered. In 2019, the opposition formed a broad united front against the PiS, with Christian democrats allied with social democrats, liberals, and greens (getting 38.47% of all votes). Other left-wing parties ran separately, with modest success. The nationalist *Confederation* failed miserably, falling below the electoral threshold. The undisputed winner of that ballot was the PiS, on 45.38%¹⁵, reflecting their hegemony in domestic politics. Compared to 2019, the PiS lost almost 2 million votes this time.

The anticipated turnout proved accurate: only 40.65% of all voters cast their ballot.¹⁶ European elections usually command less interest than parliamentary ones, but turnout in the last two ballots had doubled (2019: 45.68% vs. 2014's 23.83%, 2009: 24.53% vs. 2004's 20.87%).¹⁷ This might be attributed to embracing European elections as a standard political process: normalising Poland's EU membership. However, a spill-over effect on voter mobilisation of the fierce political rivalry at national level cannot be ruled out.

Euro-enthusiasm cooling down

The 2024 EP election took place 20 years after Poland joined the EU in the 'big bang enlargement' on 1 May 2004. Poland has always been one of the most pro-European societies. Controversies around joining the EU were at their most pronounced back in 2004, with intense 'pro' and 'con' campaigns preceding the referendum. Over the last 20 years,

the percentage of opponents has never exceeded 1/5th of the population (in 2014), with a record-high support for EU membership of 92% in 2022.¹⁸

A murkier picture emerges when it comes to the costs and benefits of EU membership. Polish Euro-enthusiasm has clearly cooled down in the past years. Today, only 77% support the membership, with 59% seeing more advantages than disadvantages.¹⁹ Financial and economic benefits are followed by the freedom of movement and security. Of all EU policies, migration, green transition, and agriculture raise the most concerns among Poles.²⁰

When it comes to subsidiarity or support for particular EU policies, opinions more favourable towards the EU correlate with political sympathies: national-conservative and far-right voters (PiS, *Confederation*) tend to disagree with EU policy-making more often, whereas people voting centre-right or left (*Third Way*, *The Left*, KO) usually support the course of the EU.²¹ This was particularly true for disputes between the previous PiS-led government and the EU, such as the 2016 logging operations in Białowieża Forest, 2019 LGBTQ-free zones, 2020 licensing process for the Turów lignite mine, and the 2021 rule of law crisis.²²

The increased political competition and polarisation turned the European election into yet another indicator of support for or against specific domestic politics, and into a platform on which to express partisan affiliation. The EU was debated from the perspective of national interests and through the lens of domestic political rivalry. The Europeanisation of election campaigns and debates simply didn't materialise.

Consensus on EU membership, no common vision of Europe

The clash between KO and PiS, two premier league players restlessly competing for primacy, set the agenda of the electoral campaign. As the day of the election approached, bragging about patriotic virtues and mutual accusations of treason in favour of Brussels, Germany, Russia, and 'Polexit'²³ intensified.

The PiS and their junior coalition partner *Suwerenna Polska* chose "the white-reds" as their team slogan - referring to the national colours - and embarked on voicing the rhetoric of "Brussels diktat"²⁴ and anti-German sentiments²⁵ that so intensely figured in the 2023 parliamentary campaign. It advocated for a 'Europe of Fatherlands' and strongly opposed any further federalisation.²⁶

Of all the major campaign topics, the PiS party singled out the European Green Deal for its dire consequences for agriculture and impact on everyday lives, such as the rising cost of living, travel, and mortgages²⁷: "The Green Deal is a scam, it is poverty, it needs to stop", said the former prime minister and candidate for the European elections, Beata Szydło, during her campaign.²⁸ The Migration Pact was portrayed as a threat to national security.²⁹ The debate on the envisaged treaty changes, including scrapping the veto rights or pursuing even closer integration, got deranged and shifted towards emotional appeals to protect national sovereignty³⁰, including the Polish złoty.³¹

An instrumental approach of the PiS party towards the EP manifested in treating it as a form of deserved political retirement home. The PiS often tends to reward the most active members with well-paid mandates as Members of the European Parliament, and this time was not different. For example, Maciej Wąsik and Mariusz Kamiński, former government officials recently sentenced for

Pegasus spyware abuse, were candidates. Further loyal party members were rewarded, such as Jacek Kurski, former president of the public broadcaster TVP, Daniel Obajtek, former executive chairman of the state-owned petrol retailer and oil refiner PKN Orlen accused of corruption or Beata Szydło, prime minister from 2015 to 2017.

The Civic Coalition (KO) led by Tusk presented the least detailed manifesto to voters, focusing instead on the composition of its lists. The coalition set their priorities as security and arms expenditure, healthy and sustainable energy, and defending the interests of Polish entrepreneurs and farmers.³² KO highlighted its recent diplomatic success in releasing EU funds from the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF). They also warned against the combative style of doing politics represented in the past by PiS in Brussels/Strasbourg: "The European Parliament cannot be a place for lunatics and political idiots", Tusk said at a press conference in May³³, and his tone became increasingly confrontational as the campaign unfolded. In the final stretch, Tusk's campaign focused mostly on the efforts to improve security on the eastern border and migration. This is a significant change in Tusk's rhetoric: As the opposition leader, he used to accuse the PiS-government of an inhumane approach towards migrants. In taking over the authorities, he was confronted not only with ever-rising tensions with Belarus, but also with a public mood that is not favourable to migrants nomadising at the border. This combination of factors has probably caused a 180-degree turn in approach.

The fight for third place between *Third Way*, *The Left*, and *Confederation* was more substantial. *Third Way*, a coalition of *Polska 2050 Szymona Hołowni* (Szymon Hołownia Poland 2050) together with the agrarian PSL (Polish People's Party) advertised their offer with the following slogan: "The Third Way - be yourself in Europe". They tried to offer a positive European narrative and highlighted the need for Poland to take on a proactive role in defending its interests and shaping EU policies.³⁴ The main message was about providing peace and economic growth.³⁵

They set the following priorities: security (border defence), green transition (investing in nuclear energy and amending the European Green Deal), defending the interests of Polish farmers in the EU, European health policy, and digital competitiveness.³⁶ The coalition of parties *Third Way* highlighted that its founding parties belong to different groups in the EP (Renew and EPP), giving them more leverage to influence political decisions and build bridges for cross-party alliances.

The alliance of left-wing parties, *The Left*, inaugurated their campaign with the slogan "Europe for you". It was the most Euro-enthusiastic campaign tailored to a pro-European electorate. The left recalled its historical heritage as the leading force behind Poland's EU accession.³⁷ In this year's campaign, they argued for greater European integration in social policy: launching a European Housing Fund; creating a European Workers Package to better protect workers' rights, in particular the minimum wage, transparency of salaries, protection against mobbing at work, ban on unpaid internships, fight against precarious contracts and investing in common European healthcare initiatives. They also opted for a more integrated security policy. *The Left* continued to raise their signature topic, gender equality, but this time in the European dimension, putting forward the adoption of the EU Charter of Women's Rights.³⁸ Yet, despite the ambitious and very comprehensive programme with its strong European focus, they were unable to reach a broader electorate.

"We want a normal life", was the motto of the far-right *Confederation*.³⁹ They used the most pronounced Eurosceptic messages from all parties, in a simple and concise form. Their central positions can be summarised in four points: "No to the European Green Deal; No to Energy Performance of Buildings Directive; Yes to Diesel; Yes to the Polish currency, the Złoty".⁴⁰ They are also against EU enlargement in the near future. In public debates and on social media, *Confederation* exploited three topics in particular: migration, calling the New Pact on Migration and Asylum an "absurd" idea to legalise

irregular migration⁴¹; climate and agriculture policy, labelling them "mad ecologism"⁴²; and they warned of the loss of control due to expanding EU powers, excessive taxation, and - in their eyes - an ongoing federalisation.⁴³

In the same vein but with a much smaller electoral scope, the goal of the Polexit Party was - astonishingly - not "Polexit". Instead, they advocated for what they assumed was "a European Union as envisaged by the Founding Fathers (an area of free trade and movement of people, not the rule of states and the power of bureaucracy)", refraining from imposing "laws that slow down Poland's development".⁴⁴ Other Eurosceptic committees included *Głos Silnej Polski* (The Voice of Strong Poland), *Ruch Naprawy Polski* (Movement for Repairing Poland), *Normalny Kraj* (Normal Country), and *Bezpartyjni Samorządowcy* (Nonpartisan Local Politicians).⁴⁵ A liberal, anti-establishment and pro-direct democracy group, *Strajk Przedsiębiorców* (Entrepreneurs Strike), founded in response to Covid-19 restrictions, also participated in the EU elections, but without any particular EU programme.⁴⁶

A stronger voice of Poland in the EU

The role of Poland is likely to become bigger in the upcoming mandate, due to the Russian war in Ukraine from 2022 onwards, with Poland's eastern border being an important geographical defence line, but also thanks to its unconditional support for Ukraine and the welcoming of thousands of Ukrainian refugees. In addition, the political changes in 2023 brought Donald Tusk back to power, a former Council President, who knows EU decision-making and therefore has plenty of expertise in it.

The Polish delegation to the European Parliament now has 53 MEPs, with one additional seat added in the aftermath of Brexit. It remains the fifth biggest

in national terms. As for important Polish figures, in the most recent legislative term (2019-2024), Ewa Kopacz (EPP/PO) was the Vice-President of the European Parliament while Janusz Wojciechowski (ECR/PIŚ) was commissioner for Agriculture.

Poland's geographical location predestines it to build bridges between the EU and Eastern Europe. As such, Tomasz Frankowski (EPP) co-chaired the Working Group on Belarus of the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly, an inter-parliamentary forum where members of the European Parliament and the national parliaments of Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia meet. Also, the country continues to be active in nurturing EU-Ukraine relations. Despite frictions around agricultural goods imports and unresolved historical issues, in relation to Ukraine Poland feels particularly predestined to take up this role: as its neighbour, as a country directly threatened by the possible further escalation of Russian aggression, and as the biggest country of the 'big bang enlargement', making it well-experienced in the accession process.

Two MEPs, Robert Biedroń (S&D/Wiosna) and Sylwia Spurek (Greens), were also active in the European Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality. This is likely due to the fight in Poland on abortion rights, which has seen several crowds heading to the streets and organising to fight the former government's restrictive course on women's and reproductive rights.

Lastly, the clashes over the rule of law between Poland and the EU also indicate that Polish decision-makers in the EU played an important role in this policy field. For instance, eight Polish MEPs, from all corners of the political scene, joined the European Parliament's Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE), with Andrzej Halicki (EPP/PO) as its vice-chair. While the tensions are less since Donald Tusk became prime minister and the EU dropped the Article 7 procedure, the expertise in this field from Poland is likely to remain important for EU policy-making, especially as other countries face democratic backlashes.

Conclusion

After the ousting of the last government in 2023 under the leadership of the PiS coalition (United Right) and with the return of former Council President Donald Tusk at the helm of the Polish government, Poland has left aside its confrontative course with the EU and even aspires a stronger leadership position. It made it clear: Poland is back at the table in Brussels.

From 2019 to 2024, Poland focused its EU policies on three priorities: avoiding fundamental institutional reforms and in particular Treaty changes; negotiating the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum and rejecting the relocation mechanism; and demanding structural support for "less advanced" EU member states and regulatory exemptions for the agricultural sector to avoid a heavy environmental burden from the European Green Deal.⁴⁷ These issues dominated the campaign across all parties, with no change of heart likely in the future on these three main issues. Given today's geopolitical challenges, a new focus on security and boosting the EU's defence potential will definitely be high up on the agenda, regardless of party affiliation. In fact, Poland is lobbying for creating a new post of EU Defence commissioner and would be interested in staffing it. In addition, Polish interests are likely to remain high on the agenda in Brussels as Poland will host the Council presidency in the first half of 2025.

Note: This country report was written by Maria Skóra, who is affiliated with Das Progressive Zentrum. However, the roundtable to present this country report in Poland was organised in cooperation with Krytyka Polityczna.

References

- 1 Currently there are ca. 950,000 officially recorded refugees from Ukraine, yet the number might be bigger. Source: Ukrainian Refugee Situation, Operational Data Portal, UNHCR, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>.
- 2 OSCE, Poland's parliamentary elections were competitive but marked by misuse of public resources and public media bias, international observers say, 16 October 2023, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/poland/555072>.
- 3 Onet Wiadomości, Sondaż: Polacy wysyłają Kaczyńskiego i Tuska na emeryturę, 9 May 2022, <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/kraj/czy-kaczynski-i-tusk-powinni-udac-sie-na-emeryture-polacy-ocenili-sondaz/cc8hns4>.
- 4 Krzysztof Izdebski, Magdalena Rudź, Aleksander Winciorek, Robert Woźniak, Obraz kampanii wyborczej do Parlamentu Europejskiego 2024 w mediach społecznościowych, Komunikat 2 30 kwietnia 2024, Fundacja Batorego, p. 2, https://www.batory.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Obraz-kampanii-do-PE-2024_komunikat-2.pdf.
- 5 Maria Wittels, Adam Traczyk, Polityka klimatyczna z ludzką twarzą Oczekiwania Polek i Polaków wobec zielonej transformacji, More in Common Polska, Warszawa 2024, <https://www.moreincommon.pl/co-robimy/polityka-klimatyczna-z-ludzka-twarza/>.
- 6 Daniel Tilles, Polish soldier dies after being stabbed at Belarus border preventing migrants crossing, Notes from Poland, 6 June 2024, <https://notesfrompoland.com/2024/06/06/polish-solider-stabbed-at-belarus-border-dies-from-injuries/>.
- 7 Katarzyna Domagała-Pereira, Die Welt: W kwestii migracji Tusk jest jak PiS, DW, 18 April 2024, <https://www.dw.com/pl/die-welt-w-kwestii-migracji-tusk-jest-jak-pis/a-68857786>.
- 8 CBOS, Opinia publiczna wobec kryzysu na granicy z Białorusią, Komunikat z badań Nr 160/2021, Grudzień 2021, https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2021/K_160_21.PDF.
- 9 Radovan Stoklasa, Boldizar Gyori, Slovak PM Fico no longer in life-threatening condition after being shot, minister says, Reuters, 16 May 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/shooting-after-slovak-government-meeting-tasr-agency-reports-2024-05-15/>.
- 10 Daniel Tilles, Polish judge flees to Belarus seeking asylum, News from Poland, 6 May 2024, <https://notesfrompoland.com/2024/05/06/polish-judge-flees-to-belarus-seeking-asylum/>.
- 11 National Electoral Commission, Committees in European Parliament election 2024, <https://wybory.gov.pl/pe2024/en/komitety>.
- 12 Results of voting in 2023 elections for Sejm Poland, ships and abroad, National Electoral Office, <https://sejmsenat2023.pkw.gov.pl/sejmsenat2023/en/sejm/wynik/pl>.
- 13 eWybory, Wybory do Parlamentu Europejskiego 2024, Sondáže/Polska - average for May 2024, <https://ewybory.eu/sondaze/>.
- 14 National Electoral Commission, European Parliament Election 2024, Voting results - Poland, <https://wybory.gov.pl/pe2024/en/wynik/pl>.
- 15 National Electoral Commission, European Parliament Election 2019, Voting results - Poland, <https://pe2019.pkw.gov.pl/pe2019/en/wyniki/pl>.
- 16 National Electoral Commission, European Parliament Election 2024, Turnout, <https://wybory.gov.pl/pe2024/en/frekwencja/Koniec/pl>.
- 17 National Electoral Commission, European Parliament Election 2019, Turnout, <https://pe2019.pkw.gov.pl/pe2019/en/frekwencja/pl>, Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza, Wybory do Parlamentu Europejskiego 2019, Wyniki głosowania, <https://pe2014.pkw.gov.pl/pl/>, Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza, Frekwencja w głosowaniu do Parlamentu Europejskiego <https://pe2009.pkw.gov.pl/PUE/PL/WYN/F/index.htm>, OBWIESZCZENIE PAŃSTWOWEJ KOMISJI WYBORCZEJ z dnia 15 czerwca 2004 r. o wynikach wyborów posłów do Parlamentu Europejskiego przeprowadzonych w dniu 13 czerwca 2004 r., https://pkw.gov.pl/uploaded_files/1456310585_10174.pdf.
- 18 CBOS, Opinie o członkostwie w Unii Europejskiej, Raport z badań Nr 55/2023, Maj 2023, p. 2, https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2023/K_055_23.PDF.
- 19 PAP, Czy Polacy chcą zostać w UE? Najnowszy sondaż CBOS, 26 April 2024, <https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/czy-polacy-chca-pozostac-w-ue-najnowszy-sondaz-cbos>.
- 20 Beata Roguska, Marcin Głowacki, 20 lat obecności Polski w Unii Europejskiej, CBOS Fokus nr 4/2024, https://www.cbos.pl/PL/publikacje/fokusy_tekst.php?nr=4/2024.
- 21 CBOS, op. cit, p. 4.
- 22 CBOS, Polacy o sporze z UE i członkostwie w tej organizacji, Raport z badań Nr 127/2021, Październik 2021, https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2021/K_127_21.PDF; European Commission, Commission calls for immediate suspension of logging in Poland's Białowieża Forest, Press Release, Brussels, 13 July 2017, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_17_1948; European Commission, EU founding values: Commission starts legal action against Hungary and Poland for violations of fundamental rights of LGBTIQ people, Brussels, 15 July 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_3668; Court of Justice of the European Union, Poland must immediately cease lignite extraction activities in the Turów mine, Press Release No 89/21 Luxembourg, 21 May 2021, <https://curia.europa.eu/jcms/upload/docs/application/pdf/2021-05/cp210089en.pdf>; European Commission, Poland's efforts to restore rule of law pave the way for accessing up to €137 billion in EU funds, Brussels, 29 February 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_1222.
- 23 See the original clips published on social media by Civic Platform: https://twitter.com/Platforma_org/status/1790991407076773961, https://twitter.com/Platforma_org/status/1789239814941724960.
- 24 PiS, Pytamy Polaków, jakiej Polski chcą, 9 May 2024, <https://pis.org.pl/aktualnosci/pytamy-polakow-jakiej-polski-chca>.

- 25 See the original recording of Jarosław Kaczyński's speech at the conference in Siedlce on 12 May 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Et3cAnL9Mag>.
- 26 PiS, Spotkania z udziałem Wiceprezes PiS Beaty Szydło w Łowiczu, Makowie, Rawie Mazowieckiej i Opocznie, 14 May 2024, <https://pis.org.pl/aktualnosci/spotkania-z-udzialem-wiceprezes-pis-beaty-szydlo-w-lowiczu-makowie-rawie-mazowieckiej-i-opocznie>; PiS, Powrót do idei Europy Ojczyzn to klucz do dobrobytu, 9 May 2024, <https://pis.org.pl/aktualnosci/powrot-do-idei-europy-ojczyzn-to-klucz-do-dobrobytu>.
- 27 PiS, Nowe dyrektywy unijne uderzają w Polskę i inne państwa członkowskie, 14 May 2024, <https://pis.org.pl/aktualnosci/nowe-dyrektywy-unijne-uderzaja-w-polske-i-inne-panstwa-czlonkowskie>.
- 28 Rafał Białkowski, Szydło (PiS): jedziemy rozmawiać w Polakami o skutkach Zielonego Ładu, Radio Opole, 8 May 2024, <https://radio.opole.pl/104,819738,szydlo-pis-jedziemy-rozmawiac-w-polakami-o-skutkach>.
- 29 PiS, Dziś zapadła bardzo zła dla bezpieczeństwa Polski i Europy decyzja Rady UE, przyjmująca pakt migracyjny, 14 May 2024, <https://pis.org.pl/aktualnosci/dzis-zapadla-bardzo-zla-dla-bezpieczenstwa-polski-i-europy-decyzja-rady-ue-przyjmujaca-pakt-migracyjny>.
- 30 PiS, Wspieramy polskie sprawy, a nie unijne interesy!, 11 May 2024, <https://pis.org.pl/aktualnosci/wspieramy-polskie-sprawy-a-nie-unijne-interesy>.
- 31 PiS, Biało-Czerwon! Europejska, Programowa Konwencja Prawa i Sprawiedliwości, 27 April 2024, <https://pis.org.pl/aktualnosci/bialo-czerwon-europejska-programowa-konwencja-prawa-i-sprawiedliwosci>.
- 32 TVP3 Kraków, Wybory do Parlamentu Europejskiego 2024, 25 April 2024, <https://krakow.tvp.pl/77194633/wybory-do-parlamentu-europejskiego-2024>.
- 33 See the post of the official X account of Civic Platform from 24 April 2024: https://twitter.com/Platforma_org/status/1783115202868674619/photo/1.
- 34 Trzecia Droga, Konwencja europejska Trzeciej Drogi: Bądźmy sobą w Europie!, 12 May 2024, <https://polska2050.pl/konwencja-europejska-trzeciej-drogi-badz-soba-w-europie/>.
- 35 Karolina Gawot, Wybory do Parlamentu Europejskiego. Trzecia Droga przedstawiła hasło, Polsat News, 11 May 2024, <https://www.polsatnews.pl/wiadomosc/2024-05-11/wybory-do-parlamentu-europejskiego-sz-holownia-o-osobach-kto-re-chca-wyprowadzic-polske-z-ue/>.
- 36 Trzecia Droga, Program europejski Trzeciej Drogi, 21 May 2024, <https://polska2050.pl/program-europejski-trzeciej-drogi/>.
- 37 Janusz Jaskółka, 20 lat Polski w Unii Europejskiej: Konferencja Lewicy z udziałem Aleksandra Kwaśniewskiego, Youtube, 29 April 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LqnW5xi6n5g>; Official Facebook account of Lewica: To Lewica wprowadziła Polskę do Unii Europejskiej. Nikt nam tego nie odbierze!, 27 April 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/NowaaLewica/videos/to-lewica-wprowadzi%C5%82a-polsk%C4%99-do-unii-europejskiej-nikt-nam-tego-nie-odbierze-eur/838173838357803/>.
- 38 KWW Lewica do PE, Program europejski Lewicy, April 2024, https://lewica2024.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/program_euro_Lewica_2024.pdf.
- 39 Biuro Prasowe Konfederacji, Chcemy żyć normalnie!, Konfederacja.pl, <https://konfederacja.pl/chcemy-zyc-normalnie>.
- 40 Konfederacja, 9 czerwca wybierz mądrze!, <https://konfederacja.pl/grafika/9-czerwca-wybierz-madrze/>.
- 41 PAP, Krzysztof Bosak o Pakcie Migracyjnym: jest to pomysł absurdalny, 10 April 2024, <https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/krzysztof-bosak-o-pakcie-migracyjnym-jest-pomysl-absurdalny>. Konfederacja, Bruksela forsuje pakiet migracyjny!, <https://konfederacja.pl/bruksela-forsuje-pakiet-migracyjny/>.
- 42 Michał Górski, Kandydat Konfederacji sprzeciwia się pomysłom Unii Europejskiej. Dlatego chce zostać europoseł, TVP3 Bydgoszcz, 13 maja 2024, <https://bydgoszcz.tvp.pl/77502856/tomasz-mentzen-kandydatem-konfederacji-w-eurowyborach>.
- 43 Konfederacja, Jest mnóstwo rozbieżności między interesem polskim a unijnym, <https://konfederacja.pl/jest-mnostwo-rozbieznosci-miedzy-interesem-polskim-a-unijnym/>.
- 44 The official website of electoral committee POLEXIT, <https://kw.polexit.org.pl/>.
- 45 Najwyższy Czas, Janusz Korwin-Mikke i Bezpartyjni Samorządowcy zarejestrowani, 7 May 2024, <https://nczas.info/2024/05/07/pilne-janusz-korwin-mikke-i-bezpartyjni-samorzadowcy-zarejestrowani-foto/>.
- 46 The official website of electoral committee Strajk Przedsiębiorców, <https://partia-strajk-przedsiębiorcow.pl/wiadomosci-kraj-polska/wstep-liberalny-fundament-polska-otwarta-na-rozwoj-tu-i-teraz/strajk%20przedsiębiorcow%20Polska%20Zjednoczona/wb-component/264/>.
- 47 Daniel Tilles, Poland's main parties, PiS and PO, to oppose EU treaty change, Notes from Poland, 21 November 2023, <https://notesfrompoland.com/2023/11/21/polands-main-parties-pis-and-po-to-oppose-eu-treaty-change/>; TVP WORLD, EP approves migration and asylum pact, Poland to reject relocation mechanism, TVP.pl, 10 April 2024, <https://www.tvp.pl/tvpworld.com/kategorie/politics/ep-approves-migration-and-asylum-pact-poland-to-reject-relocation-mechanism/76919286>; Aleksandra Krzyszyoszek, Poland negotiates exemption from Green Deal provisions, Euractiv, 4 March 2024, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/poland-negotiates-exemption-from-green-deal-provisions/>

About the author



Maria Skóra is a policy fellow at Das Progressive Zentrum. Previously, she was Research Associate at the Institut für Europäische Politik and head of the International Dialogue program at Das Progressive Zentrum. She holds a master's degree in sociology and a PhD in economics. 2018 Alumna of the Young Leaders Program at the Aspen Institute Central Europe in Prague. 2019 Visiting Fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States and AICGS, Johns Hopkins University in Washington, DC. She previously worked for the Humboldt-Viadrina Governance Platform in Berlin and as an expert for the All-Poland Federation of Trade Unions in Warsaw.

 @MariaSkora

 Dr. Maria Skóra

About Das Progressive Zentrum



Das Progressive Zentrum is an independent and non-profit think tank based in Berlin. Since 2007, our research, publications and events have helped stimulate ideas for societal progress, provided guidance for decisive political debates, and facilitated collaborative networks for progressives from across Germany, Europe and North America. We strive for a sustainable society that provides equal and good opportunities for all.

 @DPZ_Berlin

 Das Progressive Zentrum

 @dpz_berlin

 @dpzberlin.bsky.social

www.progressives-zentrum.org

The centre in the EU holds, for now

Eric Maurice, European Policy Centre

Introduction

The stakes of this year's European elections were high. After a legislative term marked *inter alia* by the Covid-19 pandemic, the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine, an energy crisis, and a growing fragmentation of the global economy, the question was whether the elections would produce a new leadership that can place the European Union (EU) in a position to address present and future challenges of the permacrisis in the 2024-2029 politico-institutional cycle.

As ever, the debate going into these elections related to whether voter turnout would increase compared to the past; whether citizens would vote for mainstream, pro-EU parties or rather nationalist, far-right forces; and whether there would be a majority in the European Parliament (EP) to elect the president of the European Commission. The content of the electoral campaigns was also in focus, in particular, whether the election would trigger a political debate at the EU level, and citizens' interest in EU politics in addition to domestic politics.

The EP is the only EU institution directly elected by European citizens. But while some common rules apply - like proportional representation - voting procedures and electoral lists remain national. The EU elections thus tend to be second-order elections in which domestic considerations dominate the campaign and influence voters' choices, even when EU issues are concerned.¹

To help 'Europeanise' the campaign and vote, i.e. increase the salience of European topics, and therefore increase the transparency and legitimacy of EU decision-making, the Lisbon Treaty stipulated that the Commission president should be elected by the EP upon a proposal from the European Council and "taking into account the elections to the European Parliament".² Since 2014, European political parties have been putting forward lead candidates (so-called 'Spitzenkandidaten'), with the expectation that the candidate of the party that gets the most

votes will become Commission president. Doing so was also intended to bestow more democratic legitimacy on the person leading the European Commission. The 2024 elections were the third time this process was applied, after a successful trial in 2014 but a failed attempt in 2019, which was due to decision by the Council to nominate Ursula von der Leyen rather than give the position to the lead candidate of the European People's Party, Manfred Weber.³

The political centre is still in charge, but is weakened

The 2024 EU elections brought mixed results. Overall, the pro-EU centre held and still enjoys a large majority of seats in the EP (See Figure 2). Despite some shocking results, like the remarkable victory of the National Rally (RN) in France and the second place obtained by Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Germany,⁴ the surge in support for nationalist and far-right parties in the member states did not translate into a 'sharp right turn' in the European Parliament, as many had predicted.⁵ The centre's resistance was also reflected in the re-election of Ursula von der Leyen for a second term as Commission president by the EP in July 2024, this time with even more votes (401) than in 2019 (383).⁶

In reality, the pro-EU centre is in retreat and facing a fundamental challenge from nationalist and far-right parties. At least in part, this is due to the nature of the European political system, where Members of Parliament (MEPs) are elected nationally but sit in the EP in political groups that represent well-established European parties or constitute looser groupings of parties.

A significant outcome of this year's European elections was the capacity of right-wing parties to structure themselves into three different groups, compared to two groups in the previous parliament.

These include: the European Conservative and Reformists (ECR), led by Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy, which includes parties willing to cooperate with the centre-right; the Patriots for Europe (PfE), developed from the previous Identity and Democracy (ID) group and organised around Hungary's Fidesz, France's National Rally and other Russia-friendly parties; and the Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN), which gathers more radical parties, like the AfD or Poland's Confederation, that could not find a home in the ECR or PfE.

As a consequence, while the number of MEPs from traditional party families, i.e. the European People's Party (EPP) and the Party of European Socialists (PES), did not change much after the 6-9 June vote, the actual number of right-wing MEPs evolved until the inaugural session of the new parliament in July, when political groups were at last finalised, and proved higher (i.e. 187 MEPs, see Figure 2) than what initial seat projections suggested in the wake of the elections (i.e. 134 MEPs, see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Provisional seat projection based on elections results (14 June, Data by European Parliament)

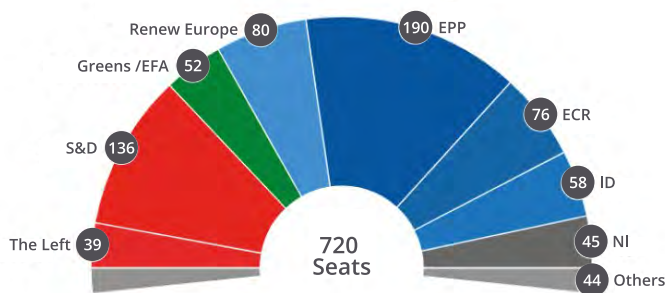
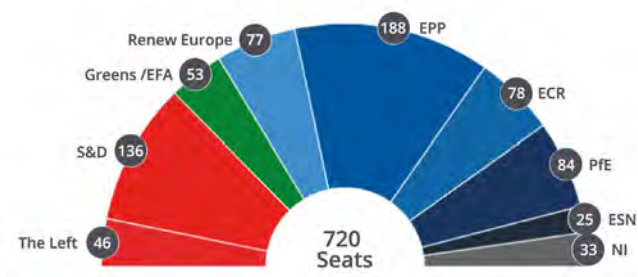


Figure 2: Share of seats in the European Parliament (July 2024, Constitutive session, Data by European Parliament)



In the outgoing parliament, ECR and ID accounted for almost 17% of all MEPs. In the new parliament, ECR, PfE and ESN have a combined share of 26% of the seats. This is the result of an increase in the number of votes cast for right-wing parties across the member states. But it is also the outcome of several right-wing MEPs (e.g. from Fidesz and AfD), who were non-affiliated in the previous legislature, and now joined political groups. In the case of the Czech party ANO, they moved from the pro-EU group Renew Europe to PfE.

Conversely, the four-way pro-EU bloc of European parties that backed Ursula von der Leyen's re-election now represents 63% of all MEPs, compared to approximately 69% in the outgoing parliament.⁷ The European People's Party (EPP) remains the main force with 188 seats, after it won nine more seats than in 2019. But all other mainstream parties lost seats: S&D ended up with -2, Renew Europe with -22, and the Greens with -17 seats.

Thus, the European elections produced less stability in the new EP than first thought immediately after the vote, when the repartition within the groups was not yet very clear. The dominance of pro-EU parties will likely be tested in the new legislature. Mainstream parties, like the Greens, which had not supported Ursula von der Leyen's Commission presidency bid in 2019, rallied behind her re-election this time, without the support of the MEPs from ECR.⁸ But such a show of solidarity at the centre will not suffice to limit the potentially disruptive role of right-wing groups in the new European assembly. Mainstream parties will also have to overcome their differences on major issues like the green transition, economic and social policies or migration. In particular, the role of the EPP, and whether it holds to a centrist ideological line instead of turning rightward (e.g. towards cooperation with ECR and the new far-right groups), will be crucial for the future EU policies.⁹

As for the right-wing parties in the new EP, they might have failed to unite in a single group, as some of their leaders had hoped, but ECR and the

Figure 3: European political parties and affiliations (Source: Politico)



novel PofE group are third and fourth, respectively, in terms of size.¹⁰ This performance puts them ahead of Renew Europe and the Greens, and gives them a symbolic victory over the centre. One challenge that these three groups face if they seek to increase their influence on policymaking is weak internal cohesion. In the previous legislature, ECR and ID were the most incohesive political groups regarding voting and were rarely on the winning side.¹¹

The jury is still out on the Spitzenkandidat system

The introduction of the Spitzenkandidat process in 2014 was hailed as an innovation with potential to reduce the gap between the EU and European citizens, but also to boost the democratic legitimacy of the Commission's president.¹² The initiative seemed to work in 2014 when Jean-Claude Juncker, the lead candidate of the European party that won the most votes, i.e. the EPP, was elected on the job. However, in 2019, Manfred Weber, also the lead candidate of the victorious EPP group at that time, was rejected by the European Council in favour of Ursula von der Leyen. The latter had not competed in the elections at all.

This time, the political situation was different. After five years at the helm of the Commission, Ursula von der Leyen sought a second term by participating in the Spitzenkandidat process. This decision both strengthened and weakened the process. On the one hand, since this was the first time that a Commission president ran as the lead candidate for the European party that came first in elections, i.e. EPP, EU leaders in the European Council could hardly ignore her bid. On the other hand, other European parties did not present serious contenders against the incumbent, or a lead candidate at all.

For example, PES chose Nicolas Schmit, a member of the college of commissioners, and who did

not really challenge his boss, Ursula von der Leyen.¹³ The liberal Renew Europe group put forward a trio called Team Europe, including Valérie Hayer, Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann and Sandro Gozi, but did not present them as lead candidates. The ECR, which had a lead candidate in 2019, decided not to put forward one in 2024. The European Left chose its president, Walter Baier, as lead candidate, but he did not actually run to become MEP. The Greens, who fielded a pair of co-lead candidates, Terry Reintke and Bas Eikhout, were the only party to present Spitzenkandidaten who simultaneously campaigned to become MEPs.

The EP's re-election of Ursula von der Leyen as Commission president remained uncertain until the actual vote in the European Parliament on 18 July, despite her being the lead candidate of the biggest party.¹⁴ Due to political fragmentation and the weakening of centrist parties in Parliament, being the Spitzenkandidat of the largest party is less important than securing a supportive majority, however heterogeneous. In the end, it is difficult to definitively establish whether von der Leyen was re-elected because she was a lead candidate or because she was the incumbent Commission president, and thus a symbol of stability and continuity in the EU leadership at a time of uncertainty and crises.

It is equally difficult to assess the impact of the lead candidate process on EU citizens' voting motivations. No post-elections survey was published on that matter, and even the Eurobarometer that polled citizens' interest in the elections failed to ask respondents about their knowledge of the Spitzenkandidaten process or the importance they attached to the choice of Commission president.¹⁵ In fact, opinions polls suggest that citizens' voting intentions and choices were mainly linked to national considerations and disconnected from the EU level. In Germany, for instance, 48% of voters said they used the elections to signal their dissatisfaction towards the federal government.¹⁶ In France, 38% of respondents indicated that they would vote above all to express their opposition to President Emmanuel Macron.¹⁷ This suggests that European citizens

participating in these elections continue to ignore the consequence of their vote for the selection of the EU political leadership.

A EU-level campaign reduced to a few topics

All registered European political parties, except Identity and Democracy (ID), published manifestos ahead of the vote. They highlighted defence and security, environment and competitiveness as the dominant issues, while social issues, migration and the topic of European institutions and democracy received less mentions than in the 2019 party platforms.¹⁸ In the manifestos of the EPP, ECR, but also to some extent of the Greens and Social-Democrats, the future of the Green Deal, energy policy and agriculture were directly linked to security, especially economic security. Parties also advocated more ambitious policies to support the EU economy and industry, and this issue emerged as a clear sign of distinction between them. While the EPP called for a "Competitiveness Strategy for Europe" to reduce red tape, the Greens defended the idea of a "Green and Social Transition Fund" equivalent to "at the very least 1% of EU GDP per year". For their part, the Socialists & Democrats proposed a "Made in Europe" strategy with an Investment Plan for the Green and Digital Transitions and ALDE called for a €100-billion investment plan for European defence.

The main themes developed in the party manifestos largely corresponded to the two main priorities discussed by European leaders in preparation of the EU Strategic Agenda for 2024-2029, i.e. security and competitiveness.¹⁹ But this only partially helped to shape debates at the EU level.

The EU election campaign remained mostly a national affair, with national parties presenting their manifestos, and no pan-European meetings orga-

nised by European political parties. The mobilisation at the EU level was mainly related to the lead candidates. For the third time, after the 2014 and 2019 elections, televised debates were organised between the lead candidates and representatives of the main parties. One was held in Maastricht and another one, called Eurovision Debate, in the European Parliament in Brussels.²⁰ A third debate, focused on economic issues and including speakers from only four parties (EPP, PES, Renew Europe, ID), was organised by the Financial Times and the Bruegel think-tank.²² These were the only events during the entire electoral campaign that sought to promote European debate. In comparison, in 2014, nine debates were organised with two or more lead candidates²³, and eight were held in 2019.²⁴

During the Maastricht and Eurovision debates, three main topics were covered, albeit from different and partially overlapping angles. First, climate and environmental issues were discussed, especially about how to fund the Green Deal, how to balance climate transition with growth and competitiveness, and with what implications for the future of agriculture policy. Second, exchanges on the theme of foreign policy and security mainly covered the issue of support to Ukraine, the development of EU defence and how to fund it, as well as the war in Gaza. EU democracy was a topic that revolved around the rise of populists and radicals, Ursula von der Leyen's intention to ally with ECR for re-election purposes, and the likelihood of EU reform. The subjects of the economy and jobs, migration and borders, as well as innovation and tech, were picked up only in one of the two debates, and the latter was framed only as a question of risks and regulation, rather than as an economic and industrial issue. China and the rule of law were also mentioned once in the two debates.

Compared to the party manifestos, the debates emphasised the future of the green transition and less on competitiveness and industrial policy. The success of the far-right and a potential cooperation between Von der Leyen's EPP and ECR also dominated both debates. Von der Leyen would need

to balance the right's desire to be more industry-friendly with the left and Greens' demands for a more ambitious EU climate policy, making the Green Deal the main issue that could prevent her re-election in the EP.²⁵ The hypothesis that she would seek ECR's support for her re-election by cooperating with it was strongly rejected by the centre and left-wing parties.²⁶ All this suggests a 'presidentialisation' of the process, as discussions mostly revolved around the outgoing Commission president rather than policy issues *per se*.

The format of the events also made it difficult for participants to really engage in policy debates. In Maastricht, the debate lasted 90 minutes and each of the eight participants had 45 seconds to answer questions. In the Eurovision debate, fewer participants (five) had a little more time (100 minutes), and could answer questions from the audience and people in different EU capitals. Both events allowed candidates to present their ideas but not to challenge each other on their proposals, if so they wanted.

In view of what has transpired, the 2024 EU level electoral campaign has only partially reflected the concerns of European voters. According to a Eurobarometer survey published in April 2024, seven weeks before the elections, the top 5 issues that citizens would have liked to be "discussed as a matter of priority" during the campaign included: fighting poverty and social exclusion (33%), supporting public health (32%), boosting the economy and creating new jobs (31%), boosting EU defence and security (31%), and action against climate change (27%).²⁷ While poverty, social exclusion and health are related to people's daily lives, they were not among the European parties' main priorities in their manifestos. This can be explained by the fact that social policies remain mostly a national competence and that new priorities like security and competitiveness, were considered by politicians as more urgent or needing new thinking.

Figure 4: Overview of topics discussed during the lead candidates debates (in chronological order within the broader categories)

Maastricht debate

Climate change

- ▶ Financing the green transition
- ▶ Maintaining support and commitment to climate policies
- ▶ Balancing economic competitiveness and environmental protection
- ▶ Balancing industrial needs and climate objectives
- ▶ Future of the Green Deal
- ▶ Farmers' protests
- ▶ Agriculture policy
- ▶ Food safety (including international)

EU democracy

- ▶ Foreign interferences in European democracies
- ▶ Mounting pressures on Rule of Law
- ▶ Risks of corruption
- ▶ EPP cooperation with the ECR
- ▶ Defending EU values and principles
- ▶ Impact of new technologies such as AI
- ▶ Impact of social media on democracy
- ▶ Institutional transparency
- ▶ EU reform (includes strengthening the role of the European Parliament)

Foreign policy and security

- ▶ Strengthening EU foreign and security policy amidst new geopolitical challenges
- ▶ Security and defence policy
- ▶ Strategic autonomy
- ▶ Support to Ukraine
- ▶ Israel-Palestine
- ▶ Overcoming unanimity principle
- ▶ Future of EU-China relations
- ▶ Migration and asylum policy (including externalisation of border management)

Eurovision debate

Climate and environment

- ▶ Use of new technologies
- ▶ Climate goals and economic growth
- ▶ Investments to finance green transition
- ▶ Future of the Green Deal
- ▶ Reform of common agriculture policy
- ▶ Farming and agriculture
- ▶ Renewable energies

Democracy and leadership

- ▶ Addressing rising populism and nationalism
- ▶ EU reform and institutional change
- ▶ Dealing with the permacrisis
- ▶ Improving decision-making (stronger European Parliament, own resources, an overcoming unanimity)
- ▶ Coalition-building in European Parliament post-elections (EPP and ECR)

Security and defence

- ▶ Integration of European defence market
- ▶ Support to Ukraine including militarily
- ▶ Spending money efficiently (against veto rights on EU financial assistance)
- ▶ Support to Ukraine
- ▶ Rearmament or disarmament
- ▶ New resources, including to finance defence

Maastricht debate

Economy and jobs

- ▶ none

Migration and borders

- ▶ none

Innovation and technology

- ▶ none

Other

- ▶ Affordable housing (linked to climate change debate)
- ▶ Secure livelihoods and salaries (linked to climate change debate)
- ▶ Foreign influence within EP radical groups (linked to foreign policy debate)

Eurovision debate

Economy and jobs

- ▶ Rising poverty
- ▶ Impact of enlargement on the economy (to slow down or to speed up)
- ▶ Pensions system and wages
- ▶ Social Europe
- ▶ Capital market union and investments
Protection of workers (including of online platforms)

Migration and borders

- ▶ Create legal pathways and take back control
- ▶ Search rescue operation in the Mediterranean (preventing death and tragedies)
- ▶ Integrating migrants and promoting social cohesion
- ▶ Role of the EU in promoting public health, especially for migrants and asylum seekers
- ▶ Externalisation of migration policies and borders control

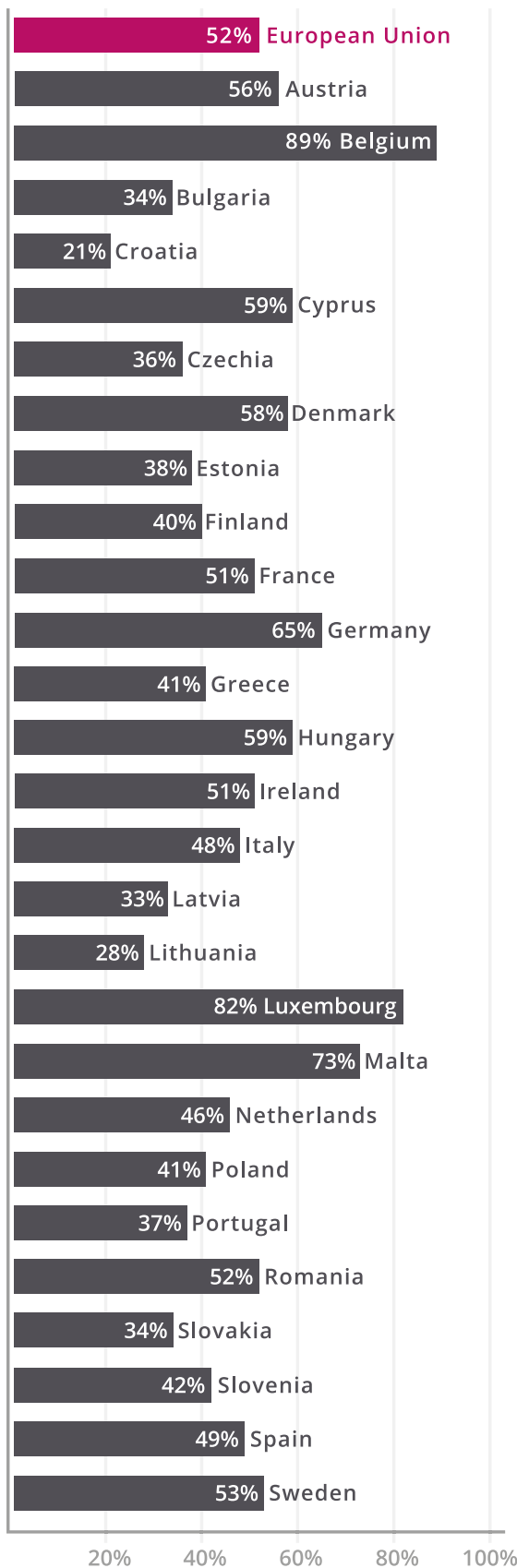
Innovation and technology

- ▶ Regulation of AI technologies
Protecting freedom of expression on social media
Controlling/regulating social media, especially TikTok
Protecting youth online
- ▶ Addressing deep fakes issue

Other

- ▶ EU reform (linked to economy, jobs and question on enlargement)
- ▶ Gaza and Israel (linked to security and defence)
- ▶ Migration policy and rule of law (linked to democracy and leadership)

Figure 5: Voter turnout at the EU level and in member states at the 2024 EP elections

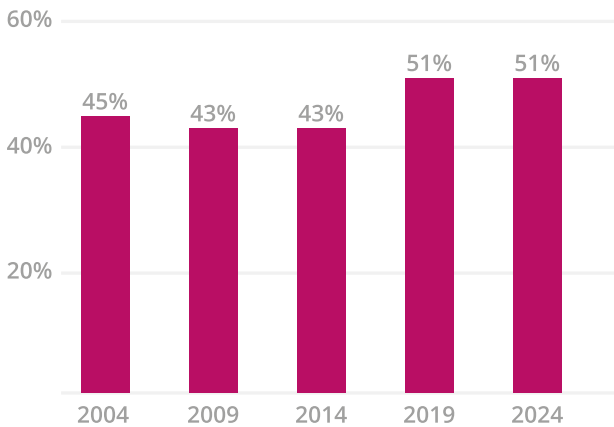


Voters' conflicting attitudes towards the EU

Voter turnout for the 2024 European elections reached 51.05%, the highest level since the 1994 elections, but with important variations between member states. Except in Belgium and Luxembourg, where voting is mandatory, participation was the highest in Malta (73%) and the lowest in Croatia (21.35%). However, despite candidates insisting that the vote was "the most important European election in history" because of the multiple and complex challenges that the EU is facing at present, the increase in turnout was only marginal.²⁸ Compared with the 2019 elections (50,66%), the difference was much smaller than the 8-percentage points increase documented between 2014 and 2019.

Although voters' motivations for participating in the European elections can be multifaceted, one inhibiting factor could be linked to citizens' conflicting attitudes towards the EU. In an April 2024 Eurobarometer survey, 71% of respondents thought that their country benefited from EU membership and 61% said they were optimistic about the future of the Union. However, only 47% had a positive image of the EU, and 36% viewed the Union in neutral terms.²⁹ More significantly, they were rather critical of the EU's response to recent major crises. For example, 50% were satisfied with the EU's response to the Covid-19 pandemic, 37% with the responses to the economic and financial situation, and 33% with the response to climate change.³⁰ This low level of satisfaction on specific issues, in contrast to the higher level of satisfaction about the EU in general, may go some way towards explaining the limited increase in turnout and the high level of electoral support offered to protest parties.

Figure 6: Turnout at the recent EP elections
(Source: Provided by Verian for the European Parliament)



your vote. Or others will decide for you" on landmark monuments in more than 60 cities across the EU.³³ The institutional campaign also mobilised civil society, business and culture associations,³⁴ as well as sport stars³⁵ to reach out to citizens, and the youth in particular, through in-person and online events to encourage people to vote. The actual impact on voters is difficult to measure, both in terms of how many people reached by these initiatives, and of how they influenced their level of interest in the vote or their voting choice.

An institutional campaign more than a political one

The limited effort to run a campaign at the EU level through debates with European party representatives was not met with success in terms of outreach and impact on voters. The Maastricht debate in April was merely followed by 2,500 live viewers.³¹ The European Broadcasting Union (EBU), which co-organised the Eurovision Debate with the EP in May, said that 212 channels in 51 countries "aired coverage" of the event and that "social media saw a spike in interest" in the elections. Yet EBU released no figures concerning the actual audience.

The communication campaign undertaken by the EP itself arguably was more visible. By 2 June, a video to raise awareness about the elections under the "Use your vote slogan" had reached over 504 million views on different social media platforms.³² It featured senior people telling young ones about their experience with war and dictatorship, and reminding them of the importance of democracy and exercising their voting right. This emotional campaign was complemented by communication, such as showing the EU flag or using the phrase "Use

Conclusion

With the highest turnout since 1994, a solid majority for the mainstream parties, and the re-election of Ursula von der Leyen as Commission president by a pro-EU coalition, the EU managed to dodge a risky scenario in which the 2024 EP vote would have reinforced democratic apathy, led to a far-right takeover and produced a leadership crisis.

However, the EP elections are still far from creating an EU-wide democratic debate about European issues of general concern to citizens across member states. Moreover, the political challenge posed by the far-right, and radical forces to the system can hardly be ignored.

Often considered second-order national elections, the campaign for the 2024 EP vote did not help to bring change in that regard. The slight increase in voter turnout and the re-election of the lead candidate process at the Commission presidency are not enough to conclude that we have moved closer to a situation where a European demos would vote with a shared interest in choosing an EU leadership along the lines of a common campaign in addition to the national campaigns.

The Spitzenkandidat experiment, and the ambition to build an EU-level campaign upon it, one which would mobilise voters across national borders, still appears insufficient to have a direct impact on voters in the 27 member states.

The EU debates organised between the lead candidates were more about the re-election of Von der Leyen by the MEPs rather than honest exchanges about the hard questions and difficult choices that politicians will face in the new mandate, given the polycrisis and poly-transitions.³⁶ As such, they were insufficiently connected to debates at the national level and to citizens' concerns.

The new legislative term started with a larger centrist coalition than before rallying behind the

candidature of Commission President von der Leyen. Despite their differences, the four groups that supported Ursula von der Leyen will likely continue steering the EU in the same general direction in policy areas such as economy, trade or climate, and only adapting them to new priorities, like security and competitiveness. However, the right-wing and anti-EU forces are also stronger in terms of numbers than they were in the previous parliament, and they seem to become stronger at every EU election.³⁷ A centrist majority cannot be taken for granted in the long-term.

This should be a reason to reflect again on how to improve this unique democratic process. We need to think of how EU elections can become less about national protest votes and narrow domestic concerns and more about representing and answering to voters' concerns and priorities on the issues that the Union and its Parliament deals with.

References

- 1 Reif, Karlheinz (1984), "National electoral cycles and European elections 1979 and 1984", *Electoral Studies*, Volume 3, Number 3, pp. 245-255.
- 2 European Union (2012), Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union, Brussels, Article 17.7, p.14. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC_1&format=PDF
- 3 De Wilde, Pieter. (2020), 'The Fall of the Spitzenkandidaten: Political Parties and Conflict in the 2019 European Elections', in Kritzinger, S., C. Plescia, K. Raube, J. Wilhelm and J. Wouters (Eds), *Assessing the 2019 European Parliament Elections*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 37-53.
- 4 The RN obtained 31.37% of votes in France, and AfD 15.9% in Germany.
- 5 Cunningham, Kevin, Hix Simon, Dennison Susi, Learmonth, Imogen (2024), "A sharp right turn: A forecast for the 2024 European Parliament elections", London: ECFR. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/a-sharp-right-turn-a-forecast-for-the-2024-european-parliament-elections/>
- 6 Liboreiro, Jorge, "Ursula von der Leyen is re-elected European Commission president by large majority", *Euronews*, 18 July 2024, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/07/18/ursula-von-der-leyen-is-re-elected-president-of-the-european-commission-by-large-majority>
- 7 European Parliament, "European elections 2024: European results" (Accessed 5 August 2024), <https://results.elections.europa.eu/en/european-results/2024-2029/>
- 8 Kaiser, Julia, "Greens play the role of 'kingmaker,' as Von der Leyen nabs a second term", *The Parliament Magazine*, 18 July 2024, <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/news/article/the-greens-play-the-role-of-kingmaker-as-von-der-leyen-nabs-a-second-term>
- 9 Stratulat, Corina, Kocsis, Levente (2024), "The European Parliament elections 2024: Getting more jitters from the mainstream than the far-right", Brussels: EPC, <https://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/The-European-Parliament-elections-2024-Getting-more-jitters-from-t~59b0f0>
- 10 Goury-Laffont, Victor, "Orbán urges Meloni, Le Pen to team up and create right-wing EU super group", *Politico*, 30 May 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/viktor-orban-urges-giorgia-meloni-marine-le-pen-create-far-right-eu-super-group/>
- 11 Stratulat and Kocsis (2024), p.11.
- 12 Kotanidis, Silvia (2023), "Spitzenkandidaten or the lead candidate process Ways to Europeanise elections to the European Parliament", Brussels: European Parliamentary Research Service, pp.16-17, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/749776/EPRS_STU\(2023\)749776_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/749776/EPRS_STU(2023)749776_EN.pdf)
- 13 Moens, Barbara, Barigazzi, Jacopo, "In Nicolas Schmit, does Ursula von der Leyen have a challenger or a running mate?", *Politico*, 17 May 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/nicolas-schmit-ursula-von-der-leyen-challenger-running-mate/>
- 14 Moens, Barbara, Wax, Eddy, Griera, Max, "Von der Leyen faces make-or-break vote on second term", *Politico*, 18 July 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/ursula-von-der-leyen-vote-second-term-european-parliament-commission-divided-giorgia-meloni/>
- 15 European Parliament (2024), EP Spring 2024 Survey: Use your vote - Countdown to the European elections, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3272>
- 16 Shade, Daniel (2024), "A Non-European Germany". Berlin: Das Progressive Zentrum, p. 5, https://www.progressiveszentrum.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/240717_dpz_election-project_country-report_Germany_E-1.pdf
- 17 Ipsos, CEVIPOF, Le Monde, FJJ, Institut Montaigne (2024), Enquête électorale française: Européennes – Vague 5 – Mai 2024, p.40, https://www.jean-jaures.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/ENEF_mai_2024.pdf
- 18 European Policy Centre (2024), "EU Elections 2024: What do party manifestos say on key policy issues?", Brussels, pp. 4-5, https://www.epc.eu/content/EU_elec.pdf
- 19 European Council (2019), Strategic Agenda 2024-2029, Brussels, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/4aldqf12/2024_557_new-strategic-agenda.pdf
- 20 Maastricht Debate, "Watch the debate" (Accessed 5 August 2024), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9lXgbp48gHI>; European Parliament, "EU Elections 2024 - Eurovision Debate – Candidates to the Presidency of the European Commission" (Accessed 5 August 2024), <https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/webstreaming/20240523-1500-SPECIAL-PRESDENTIALDEBATE2024ISL>
- 21 Bruegel, "Economic choices for Europe: EU leadership debate 2024" (Accessed 5 August 2024), <https://www.bruegel.org/event/economic-choices-europe-eu-leadership-debate-2024>
- 22 Kotanidis, Silvia (2023), p. 28.
- 23 De Wilde, Pieter. (2020), p.9.
- 24 Mathiesen, Karl, Moens, Barbara, "How von der Leyen could still lose her job", *Politico*, 11 June 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/ursula-von-der-leyen-party-greens-eco-extremists-european-commission-election-job/>
- 25 Gwyn Jones, Mared, Tidey, Alice, "Absent far right dominates conversation in last debate before EU elections Absent far right dominates conversation in last debate before EU elections", *Euronews*, 23 May 2024, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/05/23/european-election-candidates-go-head-to-head-in-live-televised-stand-off>
- 26 European Parliament (2024), p. 53.
- 27 Malingre, Virginie, Jacqué, Philippe, "Europeans vote in crucial elections for EU's future", *Le Monde*, 9 June, 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/06/09/europeans-vote-in-crucial-elections-for-eu-s-future_6674294_4.html
- 28 European Parliament (2024), pp. 159-168.
- 29 European Parliament (2024), pp. 176-189.

- 30 Alipour, Nick, "EU election debate exposes weakness of lead candidate system", Euractiv, 30 April 2024, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/eu-election-debate-exposes-weakness-of-lead-candidate-system/>
- 31 European Parliament, "European elections: the "Use Your Vote" video reaches over 504 million views", Press release, 6 June 2024, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20240605IPR21834/european-elections-the-use-your-vote-video-reaches-over-504-million-views>
- 32 European Parliament, "Europe Day: major monuments across the EU lit up ahead of the European elections", Press release, 10 May 2024, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20240508IPR21421/europe-day-major-monuments-across-the-eu-lit-up-ahead-of-the-european-elections>
- 33 European Parliament, "Civil society, business, and culture encourage citizens to vote in European elections", Press release. 7 June 2024, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20240604IPR21830/civil-society-business-and-culture-encourage-citizens-to-vote-in-eu-elections>
- 34 European Parliament, "European sports stars encourage citizens to vote in European elections", Press release, 29 May 2024, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20240529IPR21708/european-sports-stars-encourage-citizens-to-vote-in-european-elections>
- 35 Zuleeg, Fabian, Emmanouilidis, Janis, Möller, Almut, "Confronting the permacrisis: Time for a supra- governmental avantgarde", Brussels: EPC, <https://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/Confronting-the-permacrisis-Time-for-a-supra-governmental-avantgarde~5c8d5c>
- 36 Eurosceptic and far-right MEPS represented 11.52% of the EP in the 2009-2014 legislature, compared to 25.97% in the new EP.

About the author



Eric Maurice is a Policy Analyst in the European Politics and Institutions programme of the European Policy Centre. Before joining the EPC, he was head of the Brussels office of the Robert Schuman Foundation, a French think tank, where he worked on EU institutional developments, rule of law and strategic issues. Prior to that, he covered European as well as US politics as a journalist for almost 20 years working for *Courier International*, *Presseurop* and *EUobserver*. Eric holds a MPhil in Contemporary History of International Relations from the Paris Panthéon-Sorbonne University and graduated from the Paris Higher School of Journalism. He is also an alumni from the Executive Course in European Studies of France's National School of Administration (ENA) and from France's Institute of Advanced Studies in National Defence (IHEDN).

 [@erlcmu](#)

 [Eric Maurice](#)

About European Policy Centre



The European Policy Centre (EPC) is an independent, not-for-profit think tank dedicated to fostering European integration through analysis and debate, supporting and challenging decision-makers at all levels to make informed decisions based on evidence and analysis, and providing a platform for engaging partners, stakeholders and citizens in EU policy-making and in the debate about the future of Europe.

 [@epc_eu](#)

 [European Policy Centre](#)

www.epc.eu

**Key takeaways,
recommendations,
conclusion**

European elections remain "second-order" through and through

Sophie Pornschlegel, Das Progressive Zentrum

The European election is, in practice, an amalgam of 27 national elections happening simultaneously. The analysis carried out within this research project reveals hugely different interpretations of the outcome. In France and Germany, the EP election was considered a mid-term vote before the German federal election in 2025 or the French presidential elections of 2027. In Poland and Italy, the EP election was viewed as reaffirming the legitimacy of the governments in office. In some cases, the national result was also mixed up with the EU-wide result. For instance, in Germany the losses of the Social Democrats at EU level were overestimated due to the difficult situation of the 'Ampel' or traffic-light coalition at home. On the contrary, in France the good results of Raphaël Gluckmann's list (Réveiller l'Europe) was seen as if left parties had performed well in the EU. In reality support for the Socialists and Democrats (S&D) group stayed pretty stable in 2024 compared to 2019.

The EP election campaigns were significantly different from one country to the other; the results in turn led to widely different political developments. In Italy, the election marked the return to a clear left-right divide, with Meloni's party Brothers of Italy faring well, while the centre-left alliances were more successful than indicated by opinion polls. In Poland, the election campaign and result were significantly more pro-European than under the previous governments, when the Law and Justice party was on a constant collision course with Brussels. This more friendly stance towards Brussels was mostly thanks to Donald Tusk, a former Council President, back at the helm of the country since October 2023. In Germany, which is traditionally pro-European, this year's European election was not particularly European: The EU was only discussed at the margins of the campaign, with the vote mostly seen as a mid-term election in disguise for the current coalition government. In France, the electoral outcome was the most dramatic, as it led to a full-blown domestic political crisis. Macron triggered a snap election, clearly interpreting the European result as a "temperature test" for the legitimacy of his own government. He thereby implicitly admitted that EP

elections are not so much about the EU, but very much about national politics.

Even if leaving the EU was not considered an option, national topics dominated the debate

The EP election 2024 clearly showed that European elections continue to be second order votes. In all four countries analysed, there is evidence that European elections were not treated with the same attention as national ones. For instance, national political parties spent a very short amount of time on the campaigns.¹ In Italy, the party programmes and lists were presented only in late April. In France, Macron's Sorbonne speech at the end of April helped kickstart the campaign, leaving just a little over a month until election day on 9 June. In Germany, despite the heated political context with the emergence of a new far-left party and regional elections in three eastern German federal states in September 2024, the campaign did not start in earnest until April. In Poland, the European elections are part of a broader election marathon, which started with the parliamentary elections in October 2023, continued with regional elections in April 2024 and will only conclude in spring 2025 with the presidential ballot. In none of the above-mentioned countries was there any visibility for European political parties. For instance, the logos and names of the Europarties did not figure on campaign materials; the former Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) running again and the official lead candidates from the Europarties received almost no media coverage and were little present overall. Instead, decision makers known at national level dominated the public sphere, namely Prime Ministers Giorgia Meloni in Italy or Gabriel Attal in France.

Across all countries, there was a low visibility for genuinely European topics. Few of the main legis-

lative packages passed in the past five years were discussed in the campaign. There was little discussion around the Green Deal and packages such as the EU Nature Restoration Law or Fit for 55, the EU's plan for reducing its net greenhouse gas emissions. Similarly, the digital transition was absent despite the EU delivering three main legislative files with the Digital Services Act (DSA), Digital Markets Act (DMA) and AI Act. The only EU file discussed was the Pact on Migration and Asylum, which was finally agreed upon in April 2024 after several years of negotiations. In addition, certain EU policy issues did not figure at all. For instance, social and economic policies were mostly absent from debates in all four countries – there was almost no debate about the European Semester, the reform of EU fiscal rules or the Capital Markets Union. Most European issues were discussed, if at all, through a national lens.

In Italy, the parties focused mostly on domestic topics – they "embraced heated debates on constitutional reform or accusations against the government of censoring public TV or limiting abortion rights."² European topics were mostly put forward by the Eurosceptic League of Matteo Salvini. The current head of government Giorgia Meloni and her party Brothers of Italy, who pursue a staunchly anti-immigration stance, sold the European Pact on Migration and Asylum as her great achievement in this campaign. In France, the same EU immigration package, by way of contrast, was criticised by the far-right National Rally: both parties remain resolutely anti-European. This shows how differently EU initiatives can be read, depending on the national political context – and how parties nationalise success and europeanise failure.

In France, two topics dominated: First, the cost-of-living crisis and "purchasing power". These were linked to European issues through the energy crisis, as food prices were considered too high in France. Second, immigration continued to dominate headlines, especially pushed by the far-right. The former Executive Director of Frontex, the EU's border and coast guard agency, decided to run on the National Rally's list. However, he did not play an important

role in the campaign, probably because he is unknown in France. Compared to Germany, Italy and Poland, France was the only country where health played a role in the campaign. On a positive note, this might be a signal that French citizens would like the EU to act in this policy field despite its limited competences.³

In Germany, peace and security played a prominent role in the campaign. Even the Greens chose to run with security as their main campaign topic, rather than environment and sustainability. Despite the clear European dimension of Russia's war in Ukraine, the EU's role in defence, security and geopolitics remained largely absent from the debates. For instance, there were no discussions on EU sanctions policy or joint arms procurement. Instead, fringe parties, in particular the Alternative for Germany (AfD) or the new far-left Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW) promoted "peace with Russia".

In Poland, similar issues dominated the campaign: immigration and security. These two were closely linked together, especially as a Polish soldier was stabbed to death by a migrant at the border with Belarus. The narrative that prevails is that immigration is politically instrumentalised by Russia and its proxies to destabilise the EU. This is similar to France, where migration, security, and terrorism are very often discussed together, especially since the 2015 terrorist attacks. Besides immigration and security, the Green Deal was also discussed in Poland. However, a rather negative narrative prevailed, which mostly attributed responsibility for the green policies to the Polish commissioner for Agriculture, even though the Green Deal was not in his portfolio.⁴ This topic is likely to have been discussed solely due to the farmers' protests, which took place in spring 2024 in Poland or right before the EP elections.

Despite the mostly negative narratives around EU policy-making, no parties explicitly proposed leaving the EU or exiting the Euro. Even the most eurosceptic and anti-European parties, mostly on the far-right, toned down their stance. For instance, the

French National Rally dropped a potential exit of the euro in 2017, in the wake of Marine Le Pen's strategy of normalisation ("dédiabolisation"); in Germany, the AfD dropped its "Dexit" stance in 2023; and in Italy, neither Brothers of Italy nor League campaigned to leave the EU in 2024, most probably because they are in government and because Italy has hugely benefited from EU funds in recent years, most importantly through instruments like SURE and the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF).⁵ While this can be considered a positive development, it does not mean that the parties are more likely to play a constructive role in the EU; on the contrary, it could simply mean that they have shifted their strategy and realised that destroying the EU from within by hollowing out the EU's power would be more efficient.

Strongly personalised debates with little substance

National political figures dominated the debates. Especially in France and Italy, the campaigns were strongly personalised. This distinctive tilt towards individual decision-makers is likely to be linked to the electoral system and political cultures of these countries. For instance, in Italy, the vote was divided into just five broad electoral constituencies. The current Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni (Brothers of Italy) and Foreign Affairs Minister Antonio Tajani (Forza Italia) ran for the top position in several constituencies, while they made clear that they would not become MEPs if elected. Meloni even invited voters to tick her first name, Giorgia, in the ballot box. In France, the far-right candidate Jordan Bardella dominated headlines; even the prime minister, Gabriel Attal, took part, despite not being a candidate himself. While there was slightly less personalisation in Germany and Poland, the same politicians dominated the campaign even though they did not

run as candidates for the EP: Chancellor Olaf Scholz was on the campaign posters for the Social Democrats (SPD), as was Friedrich Merz, the leader of the German Conservatives (CDU).

In addition, the functioning of the EU institutions was almost always interpreted through a national lens. For instance, the role of the European Parliament was often overestimated in Germany, probably due to a lack of knowledge of how the EU works and the belief that this must mirror the German parliamentary system.⁶ In France, on the contrary, with its semi-presidential system in which politics is largely personalised, the debates focused mostly on personalities in the EP, such as the far-right Jordan Bardella or the left candidate Raphaël Glucksmann. Because of Macron's decision to trigger a snap election, debates right after the EP election rapidly reverted to the national level in France – there was little discussion about the result of the European elections. In almost all countries, the inter-institutional power plays that will shape EU decision making in the coming years barely figured. As a result, the functioning of the EU remains a black box for many EU citizens, even at a time when the EU is supposed to be discussed in more depth.

The election campaigns lacked substance in all four countries, the party programmes were little discussed, and even topics with European dimensions were reduced to national level debates. In Germany, several manifestos presented concrete ideas on different EU policy fields, such as the establishment of a European army or switching to qualified majority voting on foreign policy issues. However, these programmes did not find their way into the campaigns. And while the topics actually debated, such as the EU's support for Kyiv or immigration, have an obvious European dimension, this was largely ignored.⁷ For instance, in Italy, while "election manifestos reflected clear distinctions in proposals and principles on EU policy areas (...), day-to-day campaigning was dominated by domestic developments."⁸ Decision-makers debated Italy's constitutional reform, abortion rights and or the future of public TV; issues that had little or nothing to do with EU

policy-making. In France, the party programmes were late in being put forward - and had little substance overall. For instance, the far-right National Rally did not make any proposals on EU economic policy, simply repeating most of its 2019 programme, despite the radically changed geopolitical environment.⁹

The programmes of the Europarties had no connection to national party manifestos, except for the Greens. These Europarty manifestos reflected the EU's main priorities, such as security and competitiveness. These were then taken up in the EU's Strategic Agenda, that was adopted by the European Council three weeks later (June 27). While security was a topic discussed in France, Germany, Italy and Poland, perspectives varied widely. For instance, in Poland and Germany, the topic was discussed at national level through the geopolitical angle of Russia's war in Ukraine. In Italy and France, it was mostly discussed through the immigration (or terrorism) nexus. Competitiveness, industrial policy and strengthening the single market were virtually absent at national level. In France and Germany, the energy crisis still played a role and could be subsumed as similar issues. In Italy, the rejection of austerity politics was a topic endorsed by all political parties, from left to right. The topics that were discussed during the two European debates - in Maastricht and in Brussels - made the gap between the EU and national level debates obvious. Here, the main issues discussed were climate change and EU democracy, two topics that were sorely missing from campaign discussions at national level.

Overall, the EU was mostly discussed along the lines of the Eurosceptic or pro-European positions at national level. For instance, in Poland, "the centre right, the liberals, the greens, and the left presented a rather positive narrative of the EU, stressing the advantages of Poland's EU membership, such as security back-up in times of war, tackling the climate challenge, and financial benefits."¹⁰ While the national-conservatives and the far-right did not make the case for 'Polexit', they campaigned along Eurosceptic lines, emphasising the need to defend

national sovereignty and the financial interests of Polish citizens.

A particularly violent election – reflected in a surge of far-right votes

Compared to previous EP elections, the 2024 European elections were mired in political violence, with the assassination attempt on Slovakian Prime Minister Robert Fico mid-May and physical attacks on candidates and campaigners in Germany, most prominently on the Social Democratic candidate Matthias Ecke.¹¹ This growing violence is backed by numbers: In Germany, physical or verbal violence against elected representatives has almost doubled in the past five years, with 2,790 incidents in 2023. In France, 2,265 complaints or reports of violence were recorded in 2022, an increase of 32 percent on 2021.¹²

This physical violence was accompanied by verbal violence against certain demographic groups, in particular migrants and sexual minorities – a violence fuelled by the far-right, which is increasingly normalised. In all four countries studied – France, Poland, Italy and Germany – the far-right parties de-humanised migrants. They talked about "mass migration" as a threat to national security and sovereignty and rekindled fascist and racist ideas. Our society's growing diversity seems to lead to a vote based on fear of missing out on certain privileges and of a threat to the core of people's identities. Most centre-right parties – and even the Social Democrats in certain member states – took up these narratives. For instance, immigration is increasingly discussed through a security prism rather than from a human rights angle. The far-right also used its self-labelled anti-wokeness agenda to portray feminists and the LGBTQI community as a threat to traditional family values. This was particularly obvious in Poland with PiS, in Italy with Brothers of Italy, in France with National Rally and in Germany with the AfD.

The resentment, anger and disillusionment with politics of growing groups of voters was reflected in the political choices, leading to the success of far-right parties. They did well across all four EU countries studied during this project. In France, National Rally won 30% of the vote, well ahead of Macron's list, which got less than 15%. In Italy, Meloni's list won 28% of the vote, although it was closely followed by the centre-left with 24%, above what opinion polls had predicted. In Poland, PiS won 36% of the vote, while Tusk's Civic Coalition managed to get 37%, only one percentage point ahead – and this is without counting the 12% of Confederation, a far-right extremist party. In Germany, the far-right did not get nearly as many votes with approximately 16% for AfD; however, the regional elections in three eastern German federal states (especially Thuringia and Saxony) loomed large over this result, where the far-right subsequently won over 30% of the votes. The commonly held belief that the youth vote tends to go for progressive and green parties was also crushed. In Germany, the far-right AfD gained ground in the 16-24 age group; in France, the National Rally was the most popular choice in the 18-34 age group.¹³

New political figures on the left emerged, while the Greens did not manage to uphold their 2019 momentum

Despite the clear win for far-right parties across France, Germany, Poland and Italy, the European elections also showed interesting developments on the centre-left and the left, with different results across the four countries under study. In France, the former MEP Raphaël Glucksmann emerged as a new leftist figure, with a strong social media pres-

ence and clear positions. While his party's list won a little less than 14% in the European elections, he managed to successfully inject European topics into the French debate. In Germany, a new far-left party - Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW) - emerged as a breakaway from the Left party, winning over 6% of the vote in its first-ever election. Alongside controversial positions on how to deal with Russia, its eponymous leader also campaigned for more social justice. In Poland, Lewica, the leftist political alliance that is part of the Socialists & Democrats group in the EP, won just 6% of the votes, continuing the polarisation between the PiS, part of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), and Tusk's Civic Platform, a member of the European People's Party (EPP). In Italy, the centre-left Democratic Party (PD) re-emerged as a real contender against Meloni's party, under the leadership of Elly Schlein, while the Five Star Movement lost out.

The Greens failed to sustain the momentum they displayed in 2019. Overall, they lost out in these European elections, mostly due to poor results in Germany (12% instead of almost 20% in 2019), but also their non-existence in Poland, their minor role in France with 6% of the vote and similarly weak results in Italy, sending 6 green MEPs to Brussels. Many blame the electorate's changed political priorities, focusing on immigration and security rather than the green agenda, and the lack of a civil society movement in support of green issues, such as that behind Fridays for Future in 2019.

There were, however, two developments in this year's European elections which can be taken as positive steps for the EU. First, the lead candidate (Spitzenkandidat) system was upheld, despite the 2019 blip in which Ursula von der Leyen was elected despite not running as lead candidate. Second, there was a high electoral turnout with 51%, the highest since 1994, when it reached 56 percent. This can be read as a sign of a more politicised Europe, although not necessarily a more Europeanised one considering the surge of anti-European voices within the EU.

How to make the European elections more European

If the next European elections in 2029 are to be more European than in 2024, EU and national decision-makers will have to take several steps in the upcoming mandate. While it is unlikely that the following suggestions will make the European elections "first order", they would allow for more European-wide debates and stronger links between the EU institutions and citizens across the EU27.

Recommendation 1: Harmonise EU electoral law

First, EU electoral law should finally be harmonised. While the current system gives member states plenty of leverage, these differences do not make the European elections particularly democratic or European. Not even the voting day is the same for the 27 European elections. Member states have leverage to decide upon the minimum voting age, minimum age for candidates, voting methods for citizens living abroad, electoral threshold, as well as the electoral law used (preferential voting or closed list). Indeed, there is little democratic rationale for why for instance German, Belgian, Maltese and Austrian citizens are allowed to vote at 16 in the European elections, but not in most other countries.¹⁴ The Direct Elections Act, initially put into force in the EP's first elections in 1979, has since then only been revised twice, in 2002 and 2018. More ambitious reform plans, as presented in 2015, did not manage to pass the EU Council. MEPs made another attempt in 2022 to introduce transnational lists and a revised lead candidate procedure. However, the proposal was still in discussions at the Council during the 2024 European elections.¹⁵

If reforms are so difficult, it is mostly because member states fear two things: First, losing power over how the elections are organised. Second, smaller member states are afraid that bigger member

states would not respect the relative weighting. Lastly, member states have no interest in making the European elections more European – this would, in fact, mean a loss of power at EU level and allow the EP to gain further legitimacy, something the Council is not particularly keen on. National political parties have little or no reason to strengthen their European equivalents, if that means losing out on visibility during European elections.

Despite Council opposition, the European Parliament should attempt another revision of EU electoral law to at least achieve some improvements for the 2029 elections. To do so, it should get to work as soon as possible. In view of the difficult political context, which is unlikely to be more favourable in the future, the EP should not wait for the electoral law reforms to be part of a bigger package of institutional reforms. Instead, it should try to rally support in the main member states and take into account the concerns of smaller member states. There is a real sense of urgency – in certain member states, the elections are not "free and fair" anymore, for instance in Hungary.¹⁶ This could also affect the European elections going forward, which are not immune to democratic backsliding within the member states.

Recommendation 2: Safeguard democratic standards, in particular electoral integrity

Given this general trend of democratic backsliding, the European Commission and the European Parliament should think of safeguards to ensure that EU elections remain democratic in the future. This includes fighting disinformation and enforcing the regulations on digital platforms; ensuring media pluralism; and combating corruption both within EU institutions and in member states. The Qatar-gate scandal in December 2022 has still not led to more transparency and accountability in the EU institutions and with the political parties represented in the EP. The attempt of the Commission to establish a new EU ethics body was heavily criticised by

MEPs, as it covered little ground, had little budget and seemed more like a "face-saving" measure than one that would establish real change.¹⁷ In addition, there are already enough bodies which could be given more power. For instance, the European Ombudsman is responsible for transparency and accountability in the EU institutions – but it is an elected position, which automatically creates path dependencies.¹⁸

Generally, the Commission should uphold its ambitious democracy agenda in the next mandate. This includes investing in civic education and digital media literacy funding, for instance through the CERV (Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values) programme. This funding programme should not be curtailed in the next seven-year Multiannual Financial Framework (EU Budget) albeit it is a likely move as the fiscal space is likely to be reduced and more money set aside for the new priorities on security and competitiveness. However, democratic resilience should be a centrepiece of the EU agenda going forward.

Recommendation 3: Hold accountable political actors at national level

To europeanise EP elections, a major effort will also have to be made at national level. Particularly political parties, decision makers and the media in member states have a huge role to play in how the European election campaigns and results turn out. Until now, national parties and decision makers did close to nothing to contribute to Europeanising the debate, neither in terms of explaining the importance of EU membership nor the functioning of the EU, or placing European decision makers such as MEPs rather than national decision makers in prominent campaign positions.¹⁹ Too many still have an ambiguous relationship with Brussels, europeanising failure and nationalising successes when it fits their agenda, or criticising the EU for issues that were equally decided at national level. This hypocrisy can only go so far as citizens are not that gullible: They know that politicians at national

level also have a responsibility for decisions taken at EU level. Therefore, the dwindling support of national decision-makers and parties for the EU will also lead to a stronger mistrust of citizens towards democratic structures at national level in the long-run. Too few decision makers at national level – even from parties that consider themselves pro-European – support the EU as they should, and this leads to further Euroscepticism and lack of support for reforms necessary to ensure that the EU keeps its 'capacity to act'.

Recommendation 4: Develop effective strategies to deal with the far-right

Finally, national and European political parties along the democratic spectrum should support strategies for dealing with the far-right, in all EU institutions and agencies. Even if the centre has held, the share of the vote of far-right parties has grown and is likely to continue to do so on current trends. While the European People's Party (EPP) does not necessarily have a lot of overlap with parties further to the right in terms of policy positions, there has been a clear shift towards the right in the broader political debate, especially on migration, the Green Deal and agriculture. One explanation is that the EPP has adopted these political positions in an effort to retain its prime standing within the EU's political landscape.²⁰ As such, the far-right has already had an impact on the EU policy agenda and this undermines the "cordon sanitaire" set up by democratic parties to keep it at bay.

This development makes it even more urgent for political parties and the EU institutions to develop strategies on how to deal with the far-right, both in parliamentary practice, in campaigns, and in media debates. For instance, MEPs are not trained to face far-right populists, who instrumentalise debates and make sure they provoke others to delegitimise them – and this is true in parliamentary debates as in the media. In addition, safeguards need to be established, for instance to avoid information in the

security field being leaked to or accessed by parties with close ties to Russia or China. The EP should push to establish processes which ensure far-right politicians do not gain power positions in the EU and then change it from within into an authoritarian structure – for instance in the European Court of Justice, in the European Public Prosecutor's Office, but also in Frontex, where the former Executive Director has now joined the French far-right.

National political parties need to invest time and money now to prevent the far-right from winning further seats at the 2029 elections. While the political context is hard to predict, the current polycrisis is unlikely to solve itself. This means that decision-makers will have to double down on providing clear solutions and making sure that they communicate their successes more clearly to the public on channels where they reach voters, while at the same time countering the populist agenda of the far-right. The threat of the far-right is not going to disappear by simply criticising its parties and their voters. Instead, reaching citizens, understanding their frustrations and responding to them with tangible political answers is more likely to be effective. In the short-term, this means that the EU institutions need to deliver in several policy fields. National actors need to back the EU as a political system, and ensure that EU policies are well-explained and supported at national level, rather than ignored or criticised.

Conclusion

Sophie Pornschlegel, Das Progressive Zentrum

Despite the global and European-wide scale of surrounding crises, the 2024 European elections were once again a vote dominated and determined by national discussions and debates. In all four EU member states which were part of this research project, the EP elections turned into a vote for or against government policies at national level, rather than to truly decide upon the EU's future direction.

In Germany, the EP elections were compared to the 2021 parliamentary election, a sign of the nationalisation of EU policy-making. In France, French President Emmanuel Macron unexpectedly triggered national legislative elections, based on the disappointing result of his own party in the European vote. The elections therefore also had an impact on the European Council: Both Macron and the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz emerged weakened. The Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk managed to win by a small margin, while the Italian head of government, Georgia Meloni, won by a landslide.

While most commentators have said that the centre held firm as the main parties will continue to be able to take decisions without including the far-right in the EP, the campaigns were dominated by a general fear that the far-right would make decision-making in the EP extremely difficult in the coming five years – a fear which is understandable given the general political environment, in which the far-right governs in Italy and Hungary, is part of a governing coalition in the Netherlands and Sweden, and is constantly growing in France and Germany. If we do not want the EP elections in 2029 to be the last democratic ones, the EU will have to take its democracy agenda even more seriously than in the last mandate – not only by harmonising electoral law, but also by more widely safeguarding democratic standards across the EU and by developing effective strategies to counter the far-right threat.

References

- 1 Sophia Russack, Ilke Toygür (eds.), "European Parliament elections: views from member states", EPIN report, 24 May 2024. p. 4
- 2 Luca Barana, "The return of a clear left-right divide in Italy", country report Italy, p. 5
- 3 Marc-Olivier Padis, "From European election to French political crisis", Country report France, August 2024.
- 4 Maria Skóra, "Poland is back at the European table", Country report Poland, July 2024, p. 3
- 5 Luca Barana, "The return of a clear left-right divide in Italy", country report Italy, p. 5
- 6 Tagesschau, "Macht einen Unterschied, wer im Parlament sitzt", Interview mit Thu Nguyen, 08.06.2024
- 7 Daniel Schade, "A non-European Germany", Country report Germany, July 2024, p. 3
- 8 Luca Barana, "The return of a clear left-right divide in Italy", Country report Italy, July 2024, p. 5
- 9 Marc-Olivier Padis, "From European election to French political crisis", Country report France, August 2024
- 10 Maria Skóra, "Poland is back at the European table", Country report Poland, July 2024, p. 3
- 11 Christian Zentner, "Gewalt überschattet den Europawahlkampf", Das Parlament, 8. Mai 2024
- 12 Euronews, "Political violence is on the rise in EU, driven by extremism and disillusionment", 17 May 2024
- 13 Jesús Palomar i Baget, "2024 European elections: Who are young Europeans voting for?", 10 June 2024
- 14 European Parliamentary Research Service, "2024: European elections: National Rules", Infographic, April 2024
- 15 Nicolai von Ondarza and Sophia Russack, "How to make the European elections more European", CEPS Policy Brief, May 2024, p. 3
- 16 Sándor Adám Gorni, "Elections in Hungary: Free and Fair is much more than election day", Electoral Integrity Project, July 2024
- 17 Benjamin Fox, "MEPs slam 'unsatisfactory' ethics body plan in latest Qatargate row", Euractiv, 13 July 2023
- 18 European Parliament, "Election of the European Ombudsman"
- 19 Sophia Russack, Nicolai von Ondarza, "How to make European elections more European", CEPS Policy Brief, May 2024, p. 1
- 20 Salvatore Vassalo, Catherine Fieschi, "Towards the European elections", Istituto Cattaneo, 10 April 2024, p. 10

About

About Sophie Pornschlegel



Sophie Pornschlegel, the Strategic Lead of this EP election project, is a Policy Fellow at Das Progressive Zentrum and currently works as Director of Studies with the Brussels think tank Europe Jacques Delors. She teaches a course on European integration at Sciences Po Paris and is the author of the book "Am Ende der gewohnten Ordnung: Warum wir Macht neu denken müssen" (Droemer, 2023). She previously worked as Senior Policy Analyst at the European Policy Centre in Brussels, where her research focused on EU institutions, democracy and rule of law. Sophie studied political science and European affairs at Sciences Po Paris, King's College London and the London School of Economics (LSE).



@spornschlegel



Sophie Pornschlegel



@sophiepornschlegel.bsky.social

About Maria Menzel-Meyer



Maria Menzel-Meyer is Head of Communications at Das Progressive Zentrum. She studied communication science, political science and sociology in Berlin and Hagen with a focus on interconnections between social inequality and social policy, particularly labour market policy and social security. Before joining Das Progressive Zentrum, Maria worked as a journalist for national German and European media for ten years, as an instructor and designed, coordinated and realised several media projects and exhibitions.



Maria Menzel-Meyer



@mariamenzel.bsky.social

About

Das Progressive Zentrum



Das Progressive Zentrum is an independent and non-profit think tank based in Berlin. Since 2007, our research, publications and events have helped stimulate ideas for societal progress, provided guidance for decisive political debates, and facilitated collaborative networks for progressives from across Germany, Europe and North America. We strive for a sustainable society that provides equal and good opportunities for all.

 @DPZ_Berlin

 Das Progressive Zentrum

 @dpz_berlin

 @dpzberlin.bsky.social

www.progressives-zentrum.org

About Eric Maurice

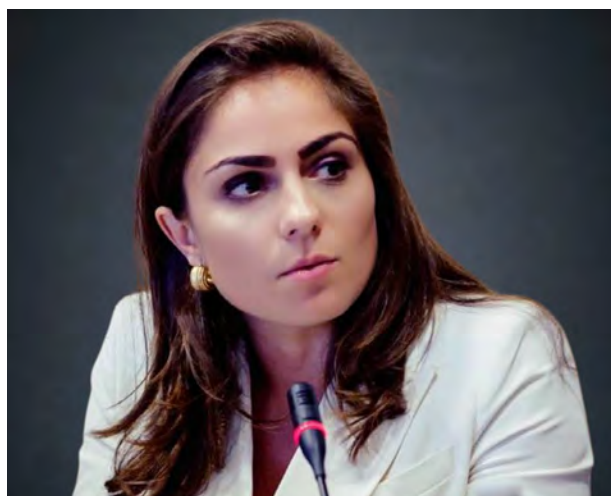


Eric Maurice is a Policy Analyst in the European Politics and Institutions programme of the European Policy Centre. Before joining the EPC, he was head of the Brussels office of the Robert Schuman Foundation, a French think tank, where he worked on EU institutional developments, rule of law and strategic issues. Prior to that, he covered European as well as US politics as a journalist for almost 20 years working for *Courier International*, *Presseurop* and *EUobserver*. Eric holds a MPhil in Contemporary History of International Relations from the Paris Panthéon-Sorbonne University and graduated from the Paris Higher School of Journalism. He is also an alumni from the Executive Course in European Studies of France's National School of Administration (ENA) and from France's Institute of Advanced Studies in National Defence (IHEDN).

 [@er1cmau](#)

 [Eric Maurice](#)

About Corina Stratulat



Corina Stratulat is Associate Director and Head of the European Politics and Institutions Programme at the European Policy Centre. Her work at the EPC focuses on EU institutional developments and enlargement towards the Balkans. She holds an MPhil in Contemporary European Studies from the University of Cambridge, UK and a PhD in Political and Social Sciences from the European University Institute, Italy. Her main research interests include comparative Central and East European politics, parties and party systems, elections, democracy, populism, EU institutions, the Balkans' EU integration, and enlargement policy. Together with Eric Maurice, Corina Stratulat will contribute Brussels perspective to the project binding together the findings from France, Poland, Italy and Germany.

 [@StratulatCorina](#)

 [Corina Stratulat](#)

About European Policy Centre



The European Policy Centre (EPC) is an independent, not-for-profit think tank dedicated to fostering European integration through analysis and debate, supporting and challenging decision-makers at all levels to make informed decisions based on evidence and analysis, and providing a platform for engaging partners, stakeholders and citizens in EU policy-making and in the debate about the future of Europe.

 @epc_eu

 European Policy Centre

www.epc.eu

About the project

"More diverse than united? An analysis of the EU elections 2024" is published as part of the eponymous project funded by The Open Society Foundation. The project is conducted as a joint cooperation between Das Progressive Zentrum (Germany) and the European Policy Centre (Belgium). In addition, it includes the following partner organisations: Istituto Affari Internazionali (Italy), Terra Nova (France) and Krytyka Polityczna (Poland).

This report analyses and compares the election campaigns and results in France, Germany, Italy and Poland and includes an EU chapter and recommendations on how to Europeanise the European elections.

The authors of the different country chapters have used their own sources for the polling numbers as well as for the election results in their respective countries. As such, there might be slight differences in numbers between the graphics and the text when it comes to poll numbers before the election.

Suggested source quotation

Maria Menzel-Meyer, Sophie Pornschlegel, Eric Maurice (eds.) (2024). More diverse than united? An analysis of the EU elections 2024. Das Progressive Zentrum & European Policy Centre. [progressives-zentrum.org](https://www.progressives-zentrum.org) 10.5281/zenodo.13833345

Imprint

All rights reserved. Reproduction or comparable use of works by Das Progressive Zentrum, including extracts, is only permitted with prior written consent.

© Das Progressive Zentrum e. V., 2024
published in September 2024

V.i.S.d.P.:

Dominic Schwickert

c / o Das Progressive Zentrum e. V.

Werftstraße 3, 10577 Berlin

Chairman:

Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Schroeder, Judith Siller,
Joachim Knodt

Executive Directors:

Dominic Schwickert, Paulina Fröhlich

Chairman of the Scientific Advisory Board:

Prof. Dr. Anke Hassel

Editors:

Sophie Pornschlegel, Maria Menzel-Meyer,
Eric Maurice, David Gow, Kym Nelson

Graphic design, layout and composition:

Greta Fleck

www.progressives-zentrum.org
mail@progressives-zentrum.org

The graphics on the cover of this report were generated using artificial intelligence technology.



 @DPZ_Berlin

 Das Progressive Zentrum

 @dpz_berlin

 @dpzberlin.bsky.social

www.progressives-zentrum.org