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# European Parliament elections: views from Member States

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This report aims to provide insights on how the European Parliament elections are being perceived from 12 different EU Member States. These short country reports comment on the current political situations, on the domestic electoral campaigns, on the topics that are dominating the political discourse and on the likely election results.

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## Key takeaways from the report

*Sophia Russack and Ilke Toygur*

We joined forces with 12 EPIN partners from 12 different EU Member States to shine a light on how they are looking at the European Parliament (EP) elections. This report aims to provide insights on how the EP elections are being perceived from these capitals, with the 12 Member States being carefully chosen to ensure a representative selection of countries from the EU's north, south, east and west.

Our colleagues have written short country reports where they comment on the political situation in their countries and how their governments look at the EU. They also took a close look at the various domestic campaigns and their 'Europeanness', and they discuss which topics are dominating the political discourse in their respective Member State. Our report also focuses on what the election results will likely be and how they can be explained, with a particular focus on the (success of) respective far-right party and what impact these elections will – or will not – have on their country.

### **Key topics**

While the key topics on citizens' minds and on politicians' agendas vary greatly across the Member States we have looked at, migration remains (or reoccurs) as a central topic. Security is increasingly present due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, especially in countries that are geographically close to Russia, such as Finland and Estonia. Economic issues are ever-present, especially in the form of purchasing power and the cost of living, in Italy and France but also increasingly in Germany. The housing crisis that many people face in many Member States also feed into both fears about economic wellbeing and stances against immigration.

The green transition remains an important topic but is increasingly linked to the future of agricultural policy (and its financing) following the recent and well-publicised farmer protests, leading to Eurosceptic conclusions such as 'Brussels has gone too far'.

It seems that topics are being slowly 'Europeanised' as today's pressing challenges (i.e. Russia's war in Ukraine, the EU's declining competitiveness when compared to other countries or regions, security and defence, and climate change) are becoming increasingly transnational.

### ***Turnout***

Turnout is expected to be high as was the case last time. It is even possible that turnout will actually increase from 2019 – according to the latest Eurobarometer data, 71 % of Europeans indicate that it is very likely they will go to vote. However, these numbers vary greatly among different Member States. In 2019, turnout in Belgium (where voting is compulsory) was at nearly 89 %, whereas in the Czech Republic only about 29 % went to their polling stations.

### ***A late campaign start and low media coverage***

Campaigns for the EP elections traditionally start notoriously late and are usually very short. We observed, among our 12 selected countries, that the national parties only presented their European political programmes/manifestos and candidates between mid-April and early May. Some countries, like Spain, only started their official campaigning period three weeks before the election.

Only then do the media start paying attention. Overall, however, the intensity of media coverage on the EP elections appears much less compared to national elections. Regarding media coverage content, a dominant topic is the rise of the far-right in some countries and whether they are a threat to democracy and the rule of law.

In some Member States, such as the Czech Republic and France, more media attention is expected after the elections over who to send to Brussels as the national Commissioner candidate and how the new College will shape up. These countries view the negotiations for the top jobs as a discussion/demonstration of their individual power at EU level.

### ***A lack of clear references to the elections' European dimension***

During the campaign, political parties and candidates, with a few exceptions, do not highlight their EU level activities, their affiliation with their European party families or to the various political groups in the EP. The distinct logos of the europarties are usually not included on national party manifestos or on billboards.

The main focus on billboards is often on the individual candidates. A clear EU reference is usually missing. Even in Europhile Member States such as Belgium there are largely only candidate images, their names and national party logos on billboards, and hardly ever slogans. Germany is an exception here, as all parties mention the EU – but even there only the Christian Democrats and the Greens include the logos of their transnational party families.

The transnational dimension of these elections (including the 'euro branding' of electoral material) is only likely to be emphasised by pro-European parties.

However, we also find negative euro branding, especially done by far-right parties on, for example, the Green Deal and its far-reaching consequences for EU citizens.

### ***The lead candidates are MIA***

There is hardly any reference to the European lead candidates, not even in the candidates' home countries. There are three candidates from Germany: While Terry Reintke (a lead candidate for the Greens) features on some billboards and the Greens mention her role as a Europe-wide lead candidate, the German liberals have not put any emphasis on Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann being one of their three lead candidates. Most surprisingly, the current Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, has not featured prominently in the Christian Democrats' campaign, neither in her capacity as the current Commission President nor in her role as the EPP's lead candidate. She does not feature strongly in the CDU campaign and, at the time of writing, is hardly present on billboards nor does her party campaign on her ambition to secure a second term as Commission President.

Similarly, in Austria, the European Left's lead candidate, Walter Baier, is not playing any role in the current election debate or in his own party's campaign. In France, the second candidate from the liberal camp, Valerie Hayer, has, unsurprisingly, not been presented as one of the candidates for Commission President – as this is not her aspiration and it is not President Macron's intention for her. The far-right National Rally's lead candidate, Jordon Bardella, is far more visible than her. The third liberal candidate, Sandro Gozi, does not feature at all in the debate, not in his native Italy and not even in France where he is running.

It seems that the Luxembourg Socialists are the only national party that is actively campaigning with 'its' lead candidate.

Thus, although the campaigns are largely about European topics (or at least have a European dimension), such as migration, border management and the green transition, the elections' transnational pan-European dimension is almost wholly absent from the national campaigns.

In short, nothing much has changed here as this has consistently been the case for every EP election.

### ***The potential outcome – the rise of the far-right***

Once again, the far-right's increasing influence and potential showing is dominating the coverage of the EP elections. The far-right traditionally does well in EP elections. We have seen a steady increase in seats in the last 20 years [from 9 % to 18 % currently](#) and this number is expected to reach a new peak in 2024.

EU-sceptical and anti-EU parties could take well above 20 % of the overall vote for the first time.

This linear trend, however, differs significantly from Member State to Member State. The radical right's gains are mainly due to increases in countries where the far-right parties sitting in either the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) or Identity and Democracy (ID) groups will come first in their national polls (such as France, Italy, Belgium and Austria). In other countries, the progress is real but less pronounced – in Poland and Italy the radical right will even decline and in Germany, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) is expected to lose electoral support in comparison to polling earlier this year due to several recent scandals.

The predominant topic that is bringing them together though is their scepticism towards migration, fuelled by the recently adopted Migration Pact. They stress the importance of national sovereignty and they all share a certain level of euroscepticism but to varying degrees.

Slogans range from *'Italy changes Europe'* by Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia, to *'Vlaanderen weer van ons'* / *'Our Flanders again'* by Vlaams Belang in Belgium and *'Unser Land zuerst!' / 'Our country first!'* by the AfD in Germany. Most of them have dropped plans to advocate an exit from the EU, however. Only the Finns Party still publicly flirts with this idea and the AfD alluded to its in its manifestos (not on billboards though, where they only call in to 'reign in the power of Brussels' and a 'New Europe'). Other than these two examples, no other (far-right) party has openly said that they want to leave the EU. Since Brexit, these parties are not necessarily trying to take their countries out of the EU but rather transform the EU from within, arguing that they would like to transfer sovereignty back to the Member States.

Ireland is an outlier here in a sense that it has never had a far-right party. Support for EU membership among the Irish population is extremely high (at 85 %). A (slight) Eurosceptic stance is covered by independent candidates who, following the Brexit experience, have also softened their stance.

While some Member States even have two far right parties, such as Italy (Fratelli d'Italia and the League), Poland (PiS and Confederation), Hungary (Fidesz and Our Homeland/Mi Hazánk) and France (National Rally and Reconquête), the Czech Republic's far-right SPD is flanked by ANO, which does not qualify as a far-right party but does make similar anti-EU rhetoric. In the Czech Republic, interestingly and despite lacking a transnational dimension overall, the SPD is promoting its transnational links to Matteo Salvini (leader of Italy's League), Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders (leader of the far-right and now largest party in the new

Dutch government, the PVV), as well as the ID group, on its billboards. Their French and Italian counterparts have not reciprocated this.

How these parties act after the elections remains to be seen. Fidesz has expressed an interest to join the ECR and the ID is potentially interested in merging with the ECR into one big block. This seems highly unlikely, however, due to their internal differences and their fundamental disagreement over their support to either Ukraine or Russia. Marine Le Pen recently declared that her party will not sit in the same group as the AfD, following controversial comments from their lead candidate.

### ***Impact on the national level***

Except for France, where Jordan Bardella might use a far-right victory to call for a vote of no confidence in President Macron to bolster Le Pen's position ahead of the 2027 presidential elections, the EP elections are not expected to much impact national politics or the incumbent government's stance towards the EU. As usual, these EP elections will merely be used as a 'temperature check' in advance of the next national elections.

National elections are key when it comes to the Council and European Council's composition and, by extension, the Commission. Leaders like President Macron will remain influential through these institutions, even if he loses EP seats. It is there, in the EP, that far-right parties will potentially be much more influential.



## COUNTRY REPORTS

### 1. Austria: A shift to the right as a prelude to the parliamentary elections in September

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

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



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

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

### ***Austrian public perception***

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

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

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

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

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

### ***The parties and their elections campaigns***

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

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

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

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

The FPÖ/ID, with lead candidate Harald Vilimsky, is in favour of radically downsizing the EU, stopping the “process of centralisation” and reversing it by returning competences to the member states. Moreover, direct democracy should take precedence over EU law, asylum abuse and illegal migration should be fought more effectively and sanctions against Russia need to be opposed. The first series of FPÖ billboards were rendered in black and white presenting the slogan “Stop EU madness” and depicted European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky hugging each other. There are also illustrations and the keywords “asylum crisis”, “warmongering”, “corona chaos” and “eco-communism”. Interestingly, in this first part of its

campaign, lead candidate Vilimsky did not feature on the billboards whereas in the second phase he is portrayed as “Patriotic – what else?”, with the additional keywords “free – safe – neutral”.

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

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

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

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

The Communist Party/KPÖ is fielding Günther Hopfgartner for the upcoming EU elections. Last time, as in all previous EU elections, the KPÖ failed to win a seat in the European Parliament, with 0.65% of the vote, but this time its prospects could be much better. According to the KPÖ, the European Parliament needs a force that can be relied upon to stand up for housing and social issues, for neutrality and for peace. In this regard, it is also worth noting that Walter Baier, an Austrian, will be the top candidate of the European Left in the EP elections. However, this

fact has played no part (yet) in the current election debate or in the KPÖ campaign itself.

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

### ***The likely results of the EP elections in Austria***

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

What is new and noteworthy is that the Eurosceptic FPÖ could substantially motivate its voters to go to the polls and could end up in first place for the first time in the history of European elections in Austria. With public dissatisfaction running high, smaller parties are also gaining ground. However, at the end of the day it is all about mobilising supporters. The election campaigns have just started and there is still a long way to go to translate the opinion polls into actual election results.

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

## 2. Belgium: Three elections and a Presidency

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

### ***Traditional parties in power facing a radical opposition***

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

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

In the Belgian federal structure, one should also look at the political dynamics within the regions, which play a prominent role in the Presidency of the Council of the EU, too, by chairing some formations of the council, a unique situation in comparison to other federal member states. An N-VA/CD&V/Open VLD coalition leads in Flanders; a PS/Ecolo/DéFI/Groen/Open VLD/Vooruit coalition is in charge

in Brussels; and a PS/MR/Ecolo one runs Wallonia. Without commenting further on who is in the opposition at this level, let us at least note that at regional level too Vlaams Belang (in Flanders) and PTB/PvdA (in Flanders and Wallonia) sit in the opposition. Interestingly, Wallonia is one of the few regions in Europe without any radical right party. Migration is a topic barely discussed there. Like the federal government, the regional governments take a pro-European stance, but with distinctions.

### ***An overshadowed European election campaign***

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

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

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



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

### ***Traditional features, and one novelty***

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

The constituencies for the three elections are different: at district level for the regional election, at provincial level for the federal election, and at community level for the European election. Belgium is one of four member states that do not have a nationwide constituency for the European ballot. Instead, it has three constituencies: one for the Flemish community, one for the French-speaking community and one for the German-speaking community. This makes the political space within which the campaign for the European election takes place even smaller than the size of the country, at a time when some in the EU are arguing in favour of an EU-wide constituency. Consequently, it is likely the analysis of the results of the upcoming European elections in Belgium will not allow one to draw



conclusions on what the *Belgians* think, but rather on what the Dutch-speaking, French-speaking and German-speaking Belgians think, respectively. Political parties must inevitably opt for candidates who are well-known in their respective communities, and therefore choose well-established politicians or popular figures from other sectors (e.g. media, business or academia). Against this background, some names of lead candidates come as no surprise: the very popular Sophie Wilmès for MR (prime minister in 2019-2020, very visible during the COVID-19 pandemic), following Charles Michel's unexpected withdrawal; Elio Di Rupo for PS (prime minister in 2011-2014 and, since 2019, minister-president of Wallonia for the second time), Johan Van Overtveldt for N-VA (minister of finance in 2014-2018 and current chair of the European Parliament Committee on Budgets); or Wouter Beke for CD&V (the party's president from 2010 to 2019). However, a certain change of guard is taking place. A career EU politician like Philippe Lamberts is leaving, but well-experienced national politicians are taking the reins of EU politics, further cementing the long-standing Belgian tradition of sending veteran politicians to the European Parliament, notable examples being Wilfried Martens and Guy Verhofstadt. In addition, the political parties use the popularity of those candidates to promote the candidates for the two other levels of power by, for instance, presenting them side by side on electoral leaflets, reinforcing the confusion mentioned previously.

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

### **Rise of the extremes**

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

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

### 3. Czechia: Anticipating the Czech European Parliament elections: ambiguous EU attitudes, sovereignty, scepticism on green policies and referendum on the government

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

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

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

### ***The ballots and campaigns: are they Europeanised?***

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

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

Similarly, the campaign revolves around how it is necessary to stop the Green Deal-induced "[green madness](#)", which may hurt the Czech economy and ordinary citizens. The Green Deal has been called "green madness" by politicians from both government and opposition parties, but it is especially politicians from the opposition ANO and SPD<sup>1</sup> parties who use this expression. Both SPD and ANO, currently in the opposition at national level, portray themselves as key defenders of Czech interests in the EU. A critical issue for them is the protection of Czech sovereignty, which in practice means, for instance, the defence of unanimous decision-making. The transnational dimension is, by and large, lacking. The current campaign is nevertheless still more Europeanised than those of the first two elections after Czech EU accession.

In the campaign, political parties and candidates, with a few exceptions, do not highlight their activities at the EU level or their connections to EP party groups. The *SPOLU* coalition downplays this aspect as the three constituent parties sit in two different party groups. An exception to this silence on the transnational dimension

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<sup>1</sup> Affiliated with the Identity and Democracy Group (ID) in the EP.

is the Eurosceptic SPD, which promotes its transnational links with Matteo Salvini, Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders, as well as the ID group, on its billboards.

They promote their joint efforts to “stop the dictate of Brussels” and “halt immigration into the EU”. No political party projected to win seats in the EP elections includes European party logos in their manifestos. In exceptional cases, European party logos can be spotted on other campaign materials, such as billboards. Similarly, the relevant Czech political parties do not actively promote the lead candidates of their respective European party federations. In a nutshell, the activities of political parties conform to the second-order election logic in which party activity for EP elections is lower than for the first-order elections, and the campaign largely focuses on the domestic [dimension](#).

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

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

### ***Navigating national priorities: themes in the Czech EP election campaigns***

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

the Green Deal, migration and integration and European identity, and cooperation to some extent.

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

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

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

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

### ***Deciphering the Czech EP elections: anticipated results and political dynamics***

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

Several factors could explain the expected success of ANO in the upcoming election. First, this is in line with the pattern from previous EP elections, suggesting that governing parties are likely to face declining support. This is also in step with previous research which has suggested that voters tend to use the EP elections as a sort of appraisal of their national [governments](#). Moreover, ANO's rhetoric, which seems to have adapted to reflect the mood of the population to maintain voters' support, has somewhat shifted to resemble that of the far-right SPD and could be attractive to Eurosceptic voters. However, the role turnout plays is also to be kept in mind as this cannot be always precisely predicted.

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



### ***What consequences for Czech domestic politics and the EU?***

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

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

## 4. Estonia repeats the 2019 election

*Merili Arjakas, Junior Research Fellow, International Centre for Defence and Security*

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

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

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

### ***A non-start to the campaign***

Ahead of the election, it is difficult to point out what has been European about matters in Estonian politics. The outcome of the 2023 national elections solidified the dominance of the Reform Party, making it nearly indispensable for forming a government. The coalition established with the Social Democrats and Estonia 200 was predicted to be stable, likely remaining in power for the full parliamentary session – already quite a feat, as rarely has Estonia had one coalition throughout the four-year term. However, the nose-dive in the Centre Party's numbers, from 16 seats to six in a year due to infighting, has further strengthened the coalition, because it has left the conservative Fatherland as the sole viable alternative for

the Reform Party if it wished to change partners. Yet the growing poll numbers that Fatherland has enjoyed since the elections, chipping away supporters from both the Reform Party and EKRE, has diminished their prospects of joining the government, because the ruling party prefers partners less popular than they are.

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

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

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

Therefore, less than a month before the election, the public interest in the EP elections had risen to just lukewarm. The parties' campaigns slowly started to gain momentum only in late April and early May, but not to a degree comparable to national elections (the EP elections in 2019 occurred just few months after the parliamentary elections, thus one campaign shifted into the other and a fair comparison cannot be made). This lack of campaigning cannot be attributed to a dearth of media interest, as outlets have been publishing opinion pieces, hosting candidate debates and providing information about procedural details. Furthermore, the incumbent MEPs began their re-election campaigns in late 2023,

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

### ***The competition of the incumbents***

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

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

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

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

### ***The primacy of security***

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

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

Fatherland addresses similar themes in its programme but given its role as an opposition party, a significant portion of the document is dedicated to critiquing the current government. Security is a priority topic both for the Fatherland party and their frontrunner MEP Riho Terras. Thus, in the programme they advocate for increasing defence expenditure to 3% of GDP for all EU member states. They emphasise member states' sovereignty over migration policy, support bolstering the Frontex budget and advocate for securing agreements with North African countries to curb migrant arrivals in Europe. In addition to Ukraine and Russia, they

underscore [other potential global threats](#), notably highlighting China as a long-term strategic challenge to democratic nations.

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

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

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

## 5. Finland: Focus on new national candidates

*Manuel Müller, Senior Research Fellow, Finnish Institute of International Affairs*

Finland<sup>2</sup> has traditionally been characterised by a broad national consensus on foreign and security policy. This also comprises European Union (EU) policy, which is mostly perceived from a diplomatic rather than a party-political perspective. The cross-party consensus includes, among other things, a high regard for the EU's common foreign, security and defence policy, a positive attitude to the single market, a strict adherence to the rule of law, and a desire not to be relegated to a "second tier" of differentiated integration. At the same time, Finnish parties are generally "frugal" when it comes to the EU budget and mostly sceptical of Euro-federalist symbolism.

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

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

The current Finnish government under Petteri Orpo (NCP) unites both of these extremes. It consists of four parties – NCP, Finns, SPP and the small Christian

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<sup>2</sup> Iso-Markku, Tuomas and Stewart, Timo. "Finland: A Radicalization of Views, a Broadening Foreign Policy Palette", in: Balfour, Rosa and Lehne, Stefan (eds.) *Charting the Radical Right's Influence on EU Foreign Policy*. Carnegie, 2024, p. 41-48. Raunio, Tapio. "Finland: disagreements over the EU's future could produce a lively European election campaign". LSE EUROPP blog (02.05.2024).



Democrats (EPP) – that are held together mainly by an agenda of fiscal austerity and labour-market liberalisation. On EU policy, the [government programme](#) is a compromise based on traditional Finnish positions: it wants Finland to be an “active, reliable and solution-oriented member state”, but also highlights that “Finland’s national interests must be identified and safeguarded in decision-making”. The three official EU policy priorities are “strategic competitiveness”, “clean and digital transformation”, and “comprehensive security”. On the latter, Prime Minister Orpo has launched the idea of a “preparedness union”, presenting Finland as an example to other EU member states.<sup>3</sup>

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

### **Campaign topics**

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

At the national level, the Finnish debate in early 2024 was unusually polarised, marked by a wave of political strikes against the government’s planned spending cuts and restrictions on trade union rights. In this context, the EU has sometimes served as an external reference point: for example, [the government has justified](#) its measures as necessary to avoid an excessive deficit procedure against Finland<sup>4</sup>. However, the debate is essentially seen as a domestic issue and has not been linked to the European elections as such.

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<sup>3</sup> Petteri Orpo’s speech in the European Parliament, 13 March 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Yle News. “Finland plans ‘difficult but necessary’ spending cuts and tax rises” (16.04.2024)

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

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

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

While the Finns Party had campaigned on leaving the EU in the 2019 European elections, it has since downplayed this goal – partly because support for EU membership in Finland has reached record highs following Russia's war on Ukraine, and partly because the party's leadership does not want to cast doubt on its ability to participate in an NCP-led government. In its [2024 manifesto](#), the party

claims that EU withdrawal “should not be treated as a taboo” although “it is not realistic for Finland to unilaterally leave the EU in the near future”.

### **Candidates**

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

Meanwhile, the supranational European parties and their lead candidates are almost completely absent from the Finnish debate. After speculation in early 2023 that [then Prime Minister Sanna Marin](#) might run as the PES's lead candidate failed to materialise, the Finnish media lost track of the process. While EPP candidate Ursula von der Leyen is of course well known as the current commission president, PES candidate Nicolas Schmit has no media presence at all. Even when Schmit visited an SDP event in Helsinki shortly after his nomination as lead candidate, the only newspaper to pick up on this was the SDP's own [party organ Demokraatti](#).

### **Likely results**

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

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

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

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

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

## 6. France: A triumphant radical-right with mixed implications for France's European role

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

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

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

Such an outcome would have mixed results for France's role inside the EU. With fewer MEPs, Macron's support inside the EP would certainly diminish. However, France would remain a key player inside the European Council. There are three reasons for this. For starters, France's presidential-parliamentary system grants

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

### ***A divided political landscape and little knowledge of the EU***

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

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

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



In terms of [voter concerns](#), immigration is a top concern in France at 41.7%, followed by climate change at 36.3% and the future of European agriculture at 35.3%. However, when asked what issues will determine their final choice in the June elections, [French voters](#) list reduced purchasing power (22%), growing immigration concerns (15%) and a stretched healthcare system (9%) as the principal drivers. Unsurprisingly then, a lot of the election campaign has focused on whether the EU makes France more or less competitive (including on energy policy and what support it provides to French industry and agriculture); more or less safe (all parties now condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, though the far-left and far-right remain sceptical about EU defence); and more or less able to tackle major areas of concerns (such as immigration and climate change).

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

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

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

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



and Marion Maréchal (*Reconquête*) are well-known in France, certainly more than Valérie Hayer, who heads Macron's list.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 7. Germany: A more polarised, politicised, but also potentially more national-focused election campaign

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

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

### ***A lacklustre start to the campaign***

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

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

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

The conservative CDU (affiliated with European People's Party; EPP), with its lead candidate Ursula von der Leyen, is unwilling to abandon its national role as a critic of the traffic light coalition in the EU election campaign. It is therefore to be expected that initiatives such as postponing the ban on combustion engines will be points of contention in the CDU's election campaign, aiming at mobilising the German electorate. However, current commission president Von der Leyen has not been featured prominently in the CDU campaign and her role as the EPP's European lead candidate has not been over-emphasised so far, taking a back

seat to her role as commission president and her role as national lead candidate. The [joint election manifesto of CDU and CSU](#), is heavily securitised and puts special emphasis on the overarching call for a stronger EU foreign and security policy and on internal security. The Green Deal, however, the flagship initiative of Von der Leyen's term as EC president, is referenced only two times in the manifesto. Bavaria's sister party, the CSU, unsurprisingly opted for the current leader of the EPP group in the EP, Manfred Weber, and is campaigning for the support of Bavarians with the slogan "For a strong Bavaria in Europe".

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

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

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

### ***An election to punish the national government***

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

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

Overall, the trend in Germany points towards losses for the mainstream, pro-European parties. The parties of the former "grand coalition", despite the CDU/CSU lead, would be well below 50% combined, whereas just ten years ago in 2014 they scored 62.6% together. Adding the Greens and the FDP, the traditional mainstream parties in Germany jointly obtained 76.7% of the votes in 2014 and are now polling together at roughly 60%. In contrast, the share of populist,

Eurosceptic or anti-EU parties (in particular AfD and BSW) could rise well above 20% for the first time.

### ***A warning shot, but not a breakdown moment***

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

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

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

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



## 8. Hungary: Derailed election campaign brings back national politics and overshadows anti-Brussels messages

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

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

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

### ***What the campaign was supposed to be about***

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

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

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

Despite the government's [dominant position](#) in the public arena, Fidesz's pre-planned Eurosceptic election campaign was washed away by two major scandals that have [rocked](#) the government since February.

The first was the so-called "[presidential pardon scandal](#)", which shook a [fundamental element](#) of the [regime's identity](#), the protection of children, and forced the resignation of President Katalin Novák and former Justice Minister Judit Varga, MP, for pardoning a person with close ties to the regime's highest circles who had been convicted of covering up a child sexual abuse case. Varga was

replaced by the much less popular MEP Tamás Deutsch as the lead candidate of Fidesz's EP list.

The scandal seemed to end by late February, but then a [new player emerged](#). The ex-husband of former Justice Minister Varga, Péter Magyar stepped into the limelight and accused the regime's second most influential person, Cabinet Minister Antal Rogán, of serious abuse of power. Using his image as a regime insider, Magyar captured the attention of [voters dissatisfied](#) with established opposition parties and launched a new movement and then a party (TISZA) to run in the elections. Leading TISZA's EP list, Magyar [campaigns against](#) further European integration, criticising especially the EU's rule of law mechanism. Nevertheless, his TISZA party seeks membership of the EPP if elected.

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

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

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

The former largest opposition party, the Democratic Coalition (DK; S&D group), is leading a joint three-party list led by MEP Klára Dobrev and including the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) and Budapest mayor Gergely Karácsony's party, Dialogue (*Párbeszéd*). Their [campaign](#) is focused on opposing PM Orbán, aiming to topple the regime with a snap election if the EP elections see Fidesz's support

fall. The liberal Momentum party (Renew Europe) is fielding a separate EP list, led by MEP and party leader, Anna Donáth. Their main campaign messages have so far focused on “[being the most active Hungarian party in the EP](#)” and getting [direct EU funding](#) to Hungarian civil society and municipalities, despite the rule of law deficiencies in Hungary. The former extreme right, now mainstream right-wing *Jobbik* party will likely lose its only MEP.

Apart from them, two parties will have some chance to gain mandates in the EP: The extreme-right Our Homeland (Mi Hazánk), and the anti-establishment, extra-parliamentary Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party (MKKP). Mi Hazánk’s leading candidate is MP and party leader László Toroczkai, who aims to join the Identity and Democracy (ID) group if elected to the EP. Based on a wide range of conspiracy theories, the party [campaigns](#) against further European integration in order to protect Hungary from the “anti-national ideological interest network of Brussels”. MKKP’s [campaign](#) focuses on anti-corruption and improving citizens’ participation in EU politics, while promising to redistribute funds for its MEPs to local community projects in Hungary. MKKP’s leading candidate is Marietta Le, an expert on civic participation, who could join the Greens/EFA group if elected.

### **Potential results of the elections**

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

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

Alternatively, Fidesz could fall below 40% and lose the majority of Hungary’s EP seats, leading to a revival and reshaping of the opposition, especially if TISZA fares well. The uncertainty is in the prospect of Péter Magyar’s movement and its ability to institutionalise. It will likely prove difficult for his movement to build a national

network of politicians and activists while keeping up the revolutionary mood and retaining the public's attention until the 2026 general elections.

### ***Hegemon in Hungary, isolated in Europe***

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

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

## 9. Ireland: Still pro-EU but agriculture and migration feature prominently in the campaign

*Barry Colfer, Director of Research, Institute of International and European Affairs*

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

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

### ***Euro-enthusiasm in Ireland***

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

Critical voices exist, particularly on the left, where the role of the EU in undermining sovereignty or in promoting free market economics is standard fare. The highpoints for such criticism were the 2001 and 2008 referendum campaigns which saw "no" votes in the first rounds of both the Nice and Lisbon Treaty referendums. Notably, Irish enthusiasm for EU membership has held in spite of the country's financial bailout by the EU and IMF in 2010 and the years of austerity



which followed. It is also widely accepted that Ireland received steadfast support from EU member states for its position vis-à-vis the Irish border amid the UK's protracted withdrawal (2016-2020).

### ***The campaign***

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

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

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

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

### ***Transnational elections in a very local context***

The transnational dimension of these elections and candidates' affiliations to groups at the European Parliament is more likely to be emphasised by candidates on the left and centre-left. Discussions of any depth of how MEPs and political groups form and operate are unlikely to happen outside specialist discussions and debate among experts and enthusiasts. For the most part, amid the noise of a



busy election where dozens of candidates are competing for attention alongside hundreds of local election candidates, budding MEPs are more likely to emphasise their leadership qualities, technical expertise and how they can be a “voice” for their constituents.

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

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

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

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

### **Possible outcomes**

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

At the European elections in 2019, five Fine Gael MEPs were returned alongside three independents, two from Fianna Fáil and two Greens. Sinn Féin underperformed, returning only one MEP. As mentioned, the constituencies for the European elections are large, and given the use of proportional representation by the single transferable vote within multi-seat constituencies, granular data are hard to come by. That said, reference to [opinion polling](#) regarding voting intention is still instructive. Sinn Féin, the main opposition party, has consistently led the polls so far in 2024 with 27-29% support, ahead of Fine Gael (19-20%), and Fianna Fáil (15-17%). The existence of three "large parties" is a relatively new phenomenon in Irish politics given the steady gains made by Sinn Féin since the party's breakthrough in 2011, when the country was in the midst of its financial bailout. Remaining party support is divided among the Social Democrats (5-6%), the Green Party (3-4%), the Labour Party (3-4%), the social conservative Aontú (3-4%) and leftist People Before Profit (2-3%). Support for independent candidates remains remarkably high by European standards at 16-19% in most polls, and as high as [24% in some recent polling](#).

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

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

A party dubbed "Independent Ireland" has emerged around a group of previously independent members of parliament representing rural interests. As a nod to the presidential nature of these elections mentioned previously, this party

secured the nomination of [Ciarán Mullooly](#), a well-known former RTÉ correspondent, to contest the Midlands-North-West constituency. In addition, given the increased salience of migration, voices from the anti-migration hard right, which have been largely absent from the Irish political landscape heretofore, have also surfaced and will feature in the campaign.

### ***Implications for Ireland***

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

### ***Conclusion***

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

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

## 10. Italy: Turning right: Italy's political landscape and EU elections

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

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

### ***Campaigns late in coming***

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

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

The tone of the campaign was set by the *Fratelli d'Italia* convention in Pescara, on April 27<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup>. On that occasion, Giorgia Meloni's key message to the electorate was to give her the mandate to bring to the EU the same political change that she brought to Italy in October 2022 and send the left-wing parties into opposition at the EU level too. Meloni will lead the *Fratelli d'Italia* list in all five Italian constituencies, but she announced that she would not take the seat if elected. Her candidacy primarily aims to attract as many voters as possible to express their preferences for her party. When announcing her candidacy, Meloni

urged her voters to write only her first name, Giorgia, on the ballot paper, “[because I am and will always be one of you](#)”, relying on her personal leadership and charisma, but also displaying a populist attitude very much in line with the hard-right political tradition.

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

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

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

The *Movimento Cinque Stelle* launched a citizens’ participation campaign in February 2024 in order to draft its electoral programme for the European elections.



Thus, the entire campaign has focused on the message of providing direct involvement for Italian citizens, in sharp rhetorical contrast to Brussels' bureaucratic elites, and being against providing military support to Ukraine. The party's leader, former Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, is struggling to present himself as the alternative to the current government and steal the role of Giorgia Meloni's main opponent from Elly Schlein.

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

### **What do the polls tell us?**

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

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



normalising right-wing views and pushing the European agenda towards more conservative positions. This shift could impact areas like single market reforms by moving in a more protectionist direction, making the implementation of the Green Deal more difficult, and further pushing the externalisation of migration policies.

### ***Looking ahead: Italian politics and the EU***

The Italian government's EU stance will not change dramatically after these elections. Giorgia Meloni will most probably continue to capitalise on her renewed activism in Europe and use it for domestic purposes, especially when it comes to the externalisation of migration management and the firm reaction to the war on Ukraine. She will try to make the most of the election results to secure a major portfolio in the next European Commission and more generally to weigh in on the negotiations for the top positions in Europe. The future of the PD will depend on the outcome of the polls, 20% (and a few points above the *Movimento Cinque Stelle*) being the psychological threshold that will spell victory or defeat and determine the fate of its current leadership and political line. As usual, domestic political matters will dominate the electoral campaign and influence the vote of Italian citizens, and they will continue to do so until EP elections are Europeanised through the creation of transnational electoral lists and the standardisation of the electoral procedures. At the same time, however, the polarisation of the political debate will place the Italian electorate before very different ideas of Europe, thus making citizens' choices a telling indication of their preferences for the future of the European project.

## 11. Poland: Between Euroscepticism in reformist guise and tempered Euro-enthusiasm

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

Against this backdrop, the representatives of the new government – made up of parties allied with the major European political families<sup>5</sup> and led by former President of the European Council Donald Tusk – were very vocal about the need to improve relations with the EU institutions and claimed a greater agency in this regard compared to PiS. The ruling coalition was unanimous on ending the dispute over the rule of law by implementing the European Commission (EC) recommendations and the CJEU rulings. The commission and the council assessed the government's actions in the realm of the judiciary as sufficient to disburse payment under the union's recovery fund (Next Generation EU; NGEU).

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

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<sup>5</sup> In the European Parliament (EP), Civic Platform, the dominant party in KO, belongs to the European People's Party (EPP) group, as does the Polish People's Party (PSL), one of two partners in TD. Poland 2050, the other party from TD, is part of the Renew Europe group, while NL belongs to the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D). This gives the government more leverage in legislative works in the EP than was the case for the PiS government and ECR party.

reservations about institutional reform of the EU<sup>6</sup>, [rejection of the Pact on Migration and Asylum](#), and opposition to the Nature Restoration Law.

### ***Campaign: themes and strategies***

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

### ***Ruling coalition***

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

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

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

The two parties that form the Third Way (TD) have different electoral profiles: the Polish People's Party (PSL) is more traditional and appeals to voters from towns and the countryside, whereas Poland 2050 targets centrist metropolitan voters. TD successfully used this to its advantage by diversifying its communication depending on the target audience and the same is to be expected from the two parties during the campaign for the European Parliament (EP) elections. Their message regarding the EU consists of being Euro-realistic and the need for Europe to return to its roots. This is probably motivated by the party leaders' diagnosis of

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<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting that the introduction of Qualified Majority Voting in selected areas is not excluded by the current government.

the social mood, in which a moderate narrative towards the EU will be the most advantageous. Being too pro-EU might be perceived as naïve and TD wants to present itself as the party that best knows how to win concessions from other members and EU institutions.

The Left is the most pro-European party sitting in the current parliament and it will emphasise its strong support for integration. The representatives of this party spoke out in favour of treaty changes and strongly supported the Green Deal. One of the first proposals unveiled during the election campaign was to start a discussion on the future constitution for Europe. It will hope that a more Euro-enthusiastic profile will woo voters who are dissatisfied with the Civic Coalition's reticence about closer integration and its neglect of the policies to prevent climate change.

### **Opposition**

Law and Justice (PiS) is likely to run a campaign focused on criticising the EU's record in recent years. Its main aim will be to fend off the challenge posed by the radical right, Eurosceptic Confederation party that will attempt to portray itself as the only genuine defender of Polish sovereignty against the EU. Polls show that only 17% of PiS supporters believe EU membership brings more benefits than losses; therefore the party can afford to be strongly critical of the EU establishment.<sup>7</sup>

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

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

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<sup>7</sup> "Sondaż. Polacy o Unii: mniej entuzjazmu, więcej sceptycyzmu", *Rzeczpospolita* (April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2024).

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

Confederation will question Law and Justice’s credentials as a Eurosceptic force and remind the electorate that it was Morawiecki’s government that subscribed to climate neutrality, the Green Deal and the CAP reform that featured stronger environmental measures. They will also reiterate opposition to common debt and claim that paying off the loans taken out for NGEU will imply the introduction of “EU taxes”. However, the party will not bring up the idea of leaving the EU but claim its goal is to reform a flailing Union driven by misguided federalism.

### ***Likely result and its impact***

Regional elections of April 2024, won by Law and Justice, have shown stability of popular support for the political forces<sup>8</sup> and their results suggest PiS can be considered the favourite. However, the Civic Coalition, which has topped most public opinion polls since February, could emerge as the winner due to advantageous circumstances that it enjoys in European elections. First, the pro-EU urban electorate is more willing to go out and vote, while mobilisation might be weaker in the PiS-friendly countryside. In addition, some conservative and Eurosceptic voters, who in national elections tactically support PiS as the strongest player, could vote for Confederation. Whatever the outcome of the race between Poland’s two largest political forces, the pro-EU parties of the ruling coalition are on course to win a majority of seats.

Tusk’s government, if fortified by a clear-cut victory over the Eurosceptic camp, could perhaps be somewhat more open to tackling delicate subjects such as the future of the green transition and institutional reforms. Yet more significant shifts in key policy areas are unlikely. With the presidential election of 2025 looming, the

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

ruling coalition will be wary of being portrayed as “soft” in the EU arena by the opposition.

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

### **Conclusions**

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

## 12. Spain's European election: national no matter what?

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### ***Spanish Europeanism resist politicisation of European affairs***

Spain is currently the only EU member state with a left-wing coalition government formed by a socialist party, the PSOE (Socialists & Democrats), and a [radical left](#) movement, *Sumar*.<sup>9</sup> The position of the coalition and most of the opposition parties regarding the EU reflects that of Spanish society, who have had a very positive perception of the EU over time, seeing it as a source of democracy, prosperity and stability.

The Spanish two-party system paid the price of the financial crisis (2008), not the European institutions. The result was a more fragmented political system which saw the emergence of new parties. Some political forces from the radical left voiced their discontent with the economic measures adopted at that time, although it was not a form of Euroscepticism, rather a [defence of a different integration project](#)<sup>10</sup>. Nowadays, this fragmented scene has consolidated but the newcomers share a sound pro-Europeanism, each one with its nuances. The only party that has presented a clear Eurosceptic vision is the radical right party [Vox](#) (European Conservatives and Reformists) even if it does not advocate for leaving the EU, but rather for preventing a federalised trend and retaining the supremacy of national sovereignty.

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

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<sup>9</sup> *Sumar* is a type of political movement that includes parties to the left of the Socialists, Greens, post-communist and progressive regional parties, whose MEPs will join the Greens, the European Free Alliance and the European United Left/Nordic Green Left.

<sup>10</sup> As an example, the electoral programme of *Podemos* in 2015 defended a deeper Common Security and Defence Policy.



national lenses and the national dimension ends up dragging Spanish political parties to their national reality.

### ***When national becomes European***

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

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

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

Since then, and before the European elections in June, three regions in Spain – Galicia, the Basque Country and Catalonia – have held elections. Although they have been used to draw conclusions in national terms, regional parties and dynamics played the leading roles. This scenario implies that the political debate will focus on how those regional elections might impact the national scenario (especially those in Catalonia, where the Socialists won). The same will apply to

the European elections, which will also be viewed through a national lens. The prime minister publicly raising the possibility of resigning recently, denouncing a campaign against his wife on the part of the radical right, has heightened the partisan confrontation.

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

### ***What are these elections about? Topics and faces***

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

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

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

In previous elections the main political parties have hosted lead candidates during the campaigns, and they are expected to do the same for these elections. The PP will try to play host to Ursula von der Leyen, although her appointment will depend on the prime minister (from the PSOE). If Von der Leyen wishes to run for a second term with the support of the grand coalition, she will need the backing of the Spanish prime minister, who is one of the strongest socialist leaders in the

European Union. In this regard, he may offer his support in exchange for an important portfolio for the Spanish commissioner and has already warned against the cooperation of Von der Leyen with radical right parties.

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

Regardless of the topics and who shows up in the campaign, political parties will continue to use national issues that have been salient in the domestic agenda to agitate it. The European elections are seen as the next political contest in the partisan confrontation. It is worth noting that European debates that are dominating the discussions, such as enlargement or the war in Ukraine, remain absent from the campaign or merely a side issue.

### ***European elections, national consequences?***

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

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

discontent of their potential electorate. This power struggle and the comparative results may also have consequences for the Socialist party, which needs a partner to maintain a stable government and remain in power.

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

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

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

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