

# How the European Elections 2024 Will Shape the EU

by Nicoletta Pirozzi

In this exceptional electoral year, with more than 4 billion people set to go to the polls around the world, European citizens expressed their political preferences for the renewal of the European Parliament last 6-9 June. These were expected to be landmark elections, mainly for the possibility that far-right political forces could shake the set-up of the European parliamentary assembly.

## *An increased role for Europe*

The unprecedented “Europeanisation” of the electoral campaigns around Europe speaks volumes about the role the European Union has assumed in the daily lives of European citizens, especially in the face of recent challenges such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the war on Ukraine. In fact, the media attention devoted to the elections in many European countries has been high, and European citizens have shown increased interest in them, with the turnout reaching

51 per cent, the highest of the latest 20 years.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the actual results had a significant impact: nationally, in particular in France, which is still struggling with the consequences of a political crisis, and in Germany, where a crisis is looming on the horizon; on political alliances within the European Parliament; on the balance of power within European institutions; and, last but not least, on the EU’s political agenda.

## *The national repercussions*

Looking at national outcomes, polarisation, fragmentation and populism seem to be common trends across EU member states. In France, following the significant result of Marine Le Pen and Jordan Bardella’s Rassemblement National (about 10 million votes) and the brave (hazardous

<sup>1</sup> European Parliament website: *European Elections 2024: Election Results: Turnout*, <https://results.elections.europa.eu/en/turnout>.

*Nicoletta Pirozzi is Institutional Relations Manager and Head of the EU, Politics and Institutions programme at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).*

for some) decision by President Emmanuel Macron to call anticipated national elections, there is still a high level of uncertainty about the formation of a new government. Set aside the scenario of a "cohabitation" with a government led by RN, with much relief by many around Europe, the prospect of a government supported by a varied coalition (more left-wing or moderate depending on the alliances) is still to materialise. Certainly, it would ensure some continuity in France's foreign and European policies, but it is destined to face stability issues. In Germany, the European elections confirmed the trend of a considerable support for hard-right populist parties: despite criminal allegations against Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) leaders (which led Le Pen to break with them at European level), the party still managed to obtain a considerable share of votes. Berlin has now to deal with a political system that is increasingly fragmented, making stable coalitions difficult. This is already affecting the resilience of the current coalition government led by Olaf Scholz, and the situation will probably get worse after the three regional elections coming up in September. France and Germany, the two largest member states, have been shaken by these EU elections, which will probably lead the respective governments to focus more on domestic politics at the expense of their role at EU level. High polarisation between pro and anti-European forces characterised also the elections in Poland, where the centre-right pro-EU Civic Coalition won, but pro-EU forces' advantage over nationalists decreased (it went down from 11 to 2 per cent). Nevertheless, the election strengthened the Polish

Prime Minister Donald Tusk's position, nationally and at European level, which further alimented the government's ambition for a closer cooperation with Germany and France in the Weimar triangle format.

### *The cordon sanitaire in the European Parliament*

In the European Parliament, a centrist, moderate, pro-European coalition has emerged, formed by the European People's Party (EPP), the Socialists and Democrats, the Liberals and the Greens. This same coalition has elected Ursula von der Leyen for her second term as President of the European Commission with a comfortable majority of 401 votes. Almost all the extremist parties voted against her, marking a clear diving line between the majority and the opposition. The vote of no confidence declared by Fratelli d'Italia – the party of Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni – only after the announcement of the results of the ballot in Strasbourg came as a surprise, given the close relationship built in the past months between Meloni and von der Leyen, von der Leyen's embrace of Meloni's stance on migration and Meloni's helping hand in neutralising Viktor Orbán's opposition to EU's sanctions against Russia and aid for Ukraine. With this vote, the Italian leader confined her party to the opposition at the EU level, thus abandoning her pragmatic approach towards Europe and her bridging role between the conservatives and the radicals in the European right. At the same time, Meloni saw her ambition to unify the far right in the European Parliament breaking into pieces with the move of her (supposed)

allies Le Pen, Orbán and Matteo Salvini, who joined forces in the newly formed group “Patriots for Europe”, and AfD leading the group “Europe of Sovereign Nations”. If we consider that a *cordon sanitaire* has prevented representatives of these two groups to take relevant positions in the European Parliament’s committees, we can safely say that the immediate risk of a radicalisation of the assembly has been avoided once again.

### *The balance in the European Council and the new Commission’s agenda*

And yet, the impact of the latest elections on the EU in the medium term should not be underestimated. In the European Parliament, much will depend on the EPP and its potential opening to Meloni’s European Conservatives and Reformists on specific agenda issues. In the European Council, the influence of right-wing and far-right political forces has grown, either because they lead national executives or because they play a greater role at national level, while the influence of France and Germany may be reduced by their governments’ weakened positions. With a less progressive European Parliament, implementing institutional reforms is going to be challenging, also considering the increase in the number of veto players. In this scenario, the re-election of von der Leyen at the helm of the European Commission supported by a pro-EU majority is positive, but her agenda for the next legislature will inevitably lean righter than her previous one. We have seen some anticipations in the months leading to the European elections. Reading von der Leyen’s political guidelines

2024–29,<sup>2</sup> we notice that some of the requests of the progressive political forces have been incorporated, such as the attention to the social fairness dimension, the confirmation of the climate commitments and a tough stance on rule of law. However, the greatest attention is paid to issues that are prominent among the EPP’s and more generally conservatives’ priorities, especially when it comes to defence, competitiveness and migration. On defence, we will see a clear dive towards a European Defence Union, increased budgetary resources for military expenditures, reinforcement of the European pillar of NATO, continued support for Ukraine. Competitiveness and growth will become the new mantra that will supersede and incorporate green transition targets, and will bring with it a focus on the completion of the single market and the development of trade defence instruments. Finally, external aspects of migration, especially border control, will be at the frontline of the EU’s migration policy.

### *Looking ahead*

Crisis after crisis, the EU has proved its resilience by adapting its institutions and policies. The latest elections have tested once again the capacity of the EU to maintain an integrationist core despite the tendency to political radicalisation emerged in many member states. However, the changing political environment at national level will inevitably affect the centre

<sup>2</sup> Ursula von der Leyen, *Europe’s Choice. Political Guidelines for the Next European Commission 2024–2029*, 18 July 2024, [https://commission.europa.eu/media/58570\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/media/58570_en).

of gravity of the EU's political agenda and the balance of power between its institutions. And all of these will have to be tested against the evolutions of the international environment, starting with the next US elections in November and the development on the battlefield in Ukraine. The new EU will definitely survive, but will it be able to thrive?

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Via dei Montecatini, 17

I-00186 Rome, Italy

Tel. +39 066976831

[iai@iai.it](mailto:iai@iai.it)

[www.iai.it](http://www.iai.it)

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