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# European Election: red alert!

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Europeans are being called to the polls between 6 and 9 June 2024 — depending on the country — to renew the members of the European Parliament. These will be the tenth elections by direct universal suffrage since 1979.

## A- CONTRASTING RESULTS

Europe and the world have changed a great deal in five years. When it took office, the Commission chaired by Ursula von der Leyen sought to be geopolitical, with the Green Deal as its priority. As it gave priority to geopolitics, the Commission certainly did not anticipate all the events that have since disrupted its plans and shown Europe's dependence.

### A global pandemic

Six months after taking office, in the spring of 2020, Europe and the world faced an unprecedented pandemic (Covid-19) that would lead to the closure of borders and the restriction of trade, with major health, social and economic repercussions. After an initial phase of "every man for himself" and the return of national responses, the Member States quickly realised that the solution could only be found at European level, in terms of treating the sick, producing protective equipment and finding a vaccine.

To counter the economic effects of the pandemic, in the summer of 2020 they devised a system of joint borrowing that no one would have thought possible under normal circumstances. Following a Franco-German agreement in May, they adopted a massive European recovery plan in July called [NextGenerationEU](#) totalling €750 billion, which is still being implemented. Some countries, such as Poland and Hungary, have not yet received all of their European funding because of their no-respect of the rule of law.

Europe responded swiftly to this crisis, which caused major disruption around the world. At the same time, it chose to reduce many of its vulnerabilities and dependencies, notably regarding China. However, in the face of the pandemic, citizens turned first and foremost to their national state, somewhat ignoring the decisive contribution made by Europe.

### War returns to the continent

No sooner had this crisis ended than Europe had to deal with a war: on 24 February 2022, Russia attempted to invade Ukraine, a neighbouring state of the European Union. And yet Europe has been built on a foundation of peace since 9 May 1950 and has succeeded in doing so until now. It no longer thought that it would have to witness another confrontation between European nations. The wake-up call was sudden and swift, but the joint response, although exceptional, had to be completed.

Just three days after the outbreak of hostilities, Europe unanimously condemned the Russian aggression and decided to support Ukraine. In the meantime it has adopted twelve rounds of [sanctions against Russia](#). The states concerned have renounced their energy dependence with regard to Putin's Russia. The European Union has become aware of its strategic vulnerability and, as a result, has taken some unusual defence decisions. Increased military spending is the order of the day everywhere, including in countries that previously spent very little, like Germany, and the provision of [ammunition](#) has become a reality. The war led two neutral States, Finland and Sweden,

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to join NATO. With the [European Peace Facility](#), for the first time in its history, Europe is providing military support to a country at war and training soldiers. The fund amounts to more than €12 billion, in addition to the resources that the Member States are deploying directly to Ukraine. [In all](#), European aid is close to €85 billion, but it still seems insufficient to definitively defeat Russian aggression.

For Europeans, this war is a serious challenge by Russia to their fundamental values (Article 2 TEU), which Ukraine wants to adopt. It is therefore essential for them to support Ukraine in its transition and to do everything possible to help it win.

For all that, this issue represents a dividing line with certain pro-Russian populist parties. It could have an impact on the vote.

### Powerful Europe?

To assert itself on the international stage, where it enjoys a number of strengths, particularly in terms of soft power, the European Union must now defend its own interests more openly. Faced with a war that it did not see or did not want to see coming, Europe seems to be floundering. Its Member States feel relatively powerless because they have not invested in their own [defence](#). Admittedly, many of them decided two years ago to increase their defence budgets substantially, but the shortfall is so great that it will take several years to catch up. And time is running out — not just to defend Ukraine from Russia, which will not stop there, and will challenge the way that the continent's security is organised — but also in Africa, where certain conflicts and migratory routes are being used by ill-intentioned forces to weaken the European project. This has even spread to our neighbourhood in the Middle East, where attacks by the Houthis in the Red Sea and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait are being used to undermine our economic interests. Yet we rely too much on the Americans to defend us. This is another example of our vulnerability. The question is: if one day our partner on the other side of the Atlantic were to demand that Europe take responsibility for its own defence and security, would Europe be capable of doing so?

Europe needs to reduce its dependence in all areas and vis-à-vis all of its many competitors. Although it is not

a State, the European Union has shown many assets. It must now demonstrate its strengths if it is to establish itself as a global player. For European public opinion, these inadequacies are plain to see. What's more, this is a dividing line with certain groups that have little desire to strengthen Europe or are openly pro-Russian.

### A green Europe... but less of the Greens

As soon as it was set up in December 2019, the Commission launched the [Green Deal](#) with the aim of responding to climate change by reducing CO2 emissions and achieving carbon neutrality by 2050, in line with the Paris Agreement. In fact, since its launch, the Commission has tabled more than seventy-five proposals aimed at adapting the Union's climate, energy, transport and taxation policies with a view to reducing net greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030. The amount of legislation adopted by the Parliament and the Council is impressive. This really is the Commission's priority, particularly under the leadership of Frans Timmermans, who was First Vice-President until October 2023.

The EU's green policy aims to be exemplary and a model for the world. But this laudable ambition has not always matched with the educational effort needed to convince public opinion, particularly amongst rural populations or the middle classes. It should have been an electoral rejuvenation for the political parties that claim to be green and which have a strong environmentalist bent. The most recent estimates show that this is not the case, and that their expected score in 2024 is likely to be lower than that achieved in 2019.

While adapting to the climate transition seems to be well understood by the vast majority of citizens, many are questioning the method chosen by the European Union, particularly the timetable for the entry into force of restrictive measures that they see as constraints rather than incentives. Electric cars yes, but not if it is Chinese vehicles that will be the cheapest on the planned date. And for those who still have a vehicle in good condition, why part with it at a time when they are being encouraged to repair before throwing it away and to favour recycling and second-hand purchases? In the same spirit, yes to a healthy environment, but not against farmers or without farmers. Finally, is the cutting-edge

European model shared by all our competitors? On the world stage, will the rules be the same for everyone? European institutions, like national governments, will have to find better ways of convincing their citizens of the merits of these new and ambitious policies if they do not want to lose public support. Populist movements are already taking full advantage of a backlash against these constraints that are upsetting so many old habits.

## B- THE MAIN STUMBLING BLOCKS

### Faltering economic growth

This will undoubtedly be one of the main issues in the forthcoming election campaign. Europe is heavily indebted (90.3% on average in the euro area). Six Member States exceed the 100% of GDP mark, well above the rules it set itself (60%) in 1997, which were suspended during the pandemic. A number of more rigorous Member States have decided to reform of the EU's economic governance and to return to the new fiscal, albeit modified, rules. But will there be a consensus on this point? Some parties already want to challenge this provision.

The European internal market is one of the most attractive in the world, with high added value. However, to adapt to the new economic requirements and remove existing obstacles (fragmentation and divergence of standards and regulations, banking union and capital markets union in the making), two studies have been commissioned by the European institutions: Enrico Letta on the future of the single market and Mario Draghi on European competitiveness, the conclusions of which are due to be delivered ... before the European elections. They are expected to conclude that integration needs to be accelerated, and this is likely to rekindle a number of disputes over how the European Union should move forward.

As a result of the pandemic and the war, Europeans have witnessed soaring prices for many products. Inflation has been keenly felt by the public since 2022 from the point of view of purchasing power, even though it has fallen rapidly (2.9% in December 2023 in the euro area). In a bid to stem the rising prices, the ECB raised

interest rates sharply in 2023, jeopardising already weak growth.

Europe, which was virtually on a par with the United States from an economic point of view twenty years ago, seems to have stalled. Growth is weaker in Europe than on the other side of the Atlantic (0.6% in Europe compared with 2.4% in the United States, according to OECD forecasts for 2023). And the outlook for 2024 is hardly any brighter (0.8%).

In a world where the economy is increasingly [digital](#), Europe went to great lengths to beef up its legislation in this area in 2023, with the introduction of the law on services (DSA), which tackles illegal online content, and the law on markets (DMA), designed to inject a dose of competition into a market dominated by digital giants that are American or Asian. The European Union is expected to finalise a regulation governing artificial intelligence, currently under discussion, designed to encourage innovation while preventing the risks inherent in this technology, where once again the main operators are from outside the EU. Finally, there is the question of the EU budget. The Commission has proposed following a mid-term review of the multiannual financial framework (2021-2028) [an increase in appropriations](#) to address the war and new challenges. But the Member States, who are the main contributors, are deeply reluctant. Discussions are ongoing. Europe will not be able to meet the demands of the moment with a reduced budget. The question is how much and what should be included in a budget that is increasingly funded by contributions from the Member States, with no real prospect of more autonomous own resources.

### A flagging demography

In 2023, the European Union had a population of 448.4 million. But its population is ageing, with life expectancy continuing to rise and fertility levels declining. The average number of children per woman in the European Union (1.59 on average) is below the generation renewal threshold, estimated at 2.05 children. For several years now, the natural balance has been negative, with the number of deaths exceeding the number of births. As a result, population growth is only balanced by the

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influx of people displaced by the war in Ukraine and immigration from the south.

Migration has therefore become a very sensitive issue. While it may seem necessary to accept legal immigration, in particular to meet the needs of businesses facing a shortage of labour, the same cannot be said of the regular waves of illegal migration that unfortunately make the headlines.

In 2020, the European Commission presented an [Asylum and Migration Pact](#), which was the subject of a belated agreement between the Council and Parliament on 20 December 2023. It provides for tighter controls on migrant arrivals, faster processing of asylum applications, a compulsory solidarity mechanism between the 27 EU Member States, and a crisis management system in the event of a sudden mass influx of migrants. It still has to be formally adopted before the end of the current legislature. We are still a long way from showing Europeans that Europe is the solution rather than the problem. These concerns and this lack of understanding are systematically exploited by populist movements.

#### What kind of governance?

With the question of further enlargement of the Union once again on the agenda, we need to think about the reforms to the rules of governance that this will imply if the European Union is to continue to function properly. As things stand, nine countries have been recognised as candidates and are knocking on the Union's door, including five countries of the Western Balkans, plus Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.

Of course, this enlargement will not happen in the short term, given the serious adjustments that the candidate countries have to make to integrate the *acquis communautaire*. But the European Union itself will have to rethink some of its procedures if it expands to thirty-six members. At this point in time, nobody is ready, and the prospect of integrating these countries is not popular.

Many believe that a revision of the Treaties will be inevitable. Others suggest that the recent crises have shown that the European Union has been able to adapt

and use all the provisions of the current treaties, some of which had never been explored before. And so, there is an urgent need to see what can be done with the Treaties as they stand before any institutional changes are considered. However, these debates are distancing public opinion even further from the major issues at play in Europe.

#### An 'secondary' election?

The European elections are all too often perceived as not being of any great importance. Firstly, because the proportional system in force in all the Member States does not give a clear victory to a single party. A coalition has to be built with other parties. And the reality in Europe is that several are now needed to do this, not just two. Secondly, because the result has little impact on the national political balance within the Member States. The fact that an opposition party comes out ahead in the European elections has no direct political consequences: the government is rarely toppled because of a failure in the European elections. As a result, some voters take the opportunity to vent their anger, in the knowledge that this will have no impact on the political conduct of national affairs. Others, believing that the European ballot is not decisive, choose to abstain.

Voter turnout improved slightly in 2019, narrowly exceeding the 50% mark (50.66%) for the first time since 1994. But it remains low, below 40% in seven Member States, and this is one of the crucial points of this election.

In the hope of attracting new voters, some countries (Germany, Belgium) have lowered the voting age to 16 for European elections. Will this be enough? A high abstention rate would send out the wrong signal for European integration; it would also boost the anti-European parties, whose electorate might become more galvanised.

#### The "wrong choice"

It would seem judicious and appropriate to adopt a slogan for the European elections of 2024 that was

used in 1978 for the legislative elections by a French president who was a great European, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, calling on voters to make "[the right choice](#)".

Given the current crises and the challenges ahead, the issue at stake in this election is to define the Europe we want for tomorrow. Either a strong Europe, capable of upholding its laws and values, defending its interests, emerging from the ordeals with its head held high and looking to the future. Or a "deconstructed" Europe, that remains inert while the world moves on, at the mercy of external predators who will be delighted to weaken a player that some have never valued or even accepted.

In this case, it is important to choose representatives, whatever their political hue, who are committed to ensuring that Europe progresses and continues its construction, which it successfully began seventy-four years ago. And not to indulge, out of anger or frustration, in an experiment that they might bitterly regret, as seems to be the case with the British, who left the European Union on the strength of lies and who are now finding this out, albeit too late.

The results of some recent national elections reveal an appetite for contesting European policies and institutions, with which citizens are not always very familiar. "Brussels" is partly to blame for this, because of its difficulty in communicating outside the "bubble".

The political parties therefore have a duty to present a solid, clear, credible programme, especially if it claims to be an alternative, and to state clearly what they will be doing in Strasbourg, the seat of the European Parliament. Finally, it is up to voters to take a close look at the votes cast by party representatives during the current term of office. They may well be in for a few surprises when they read them, since it is true that alongside the major European political families, within which we find well-informed, committed high quality lawmakers, the extremist and populist parties have not particularly shone in terms of their contribution to the work of the European Parliament!

## C - INNOVATIONS

### A larger Parliament

There are [705 outgoing MEPs](#). Europeans will have to elect 720 of them (+15) in June. As a result of their demographic situation, twelve Member States have gained seats. Three countries are each gaining two extra seats: France, which will increase its number of MEPs to 81, Spain to 61 and the Netherlands to 31. Nine countries have gained one seat: Poland (53), Belgium (22), Austria (20), Denmark (15), Finland (15), Slovakia (15), Ireland (14), Slovenia (9) and Latvia (9).

This brings the absolute majority to 361 MEPs.

### A more fragmented Parliament

At the last European elections in 2019, voters brought the "duopoly" held by the two largest parties since 1979 to an end. For the first time, the European People's Party (EPP) and the Party of European Socialists (PES) and their groups, the EPP and S&D, failed to win an absolute majority on their own. This political earthquake forced them to call on a third force, the Liberals, (101 elected members) to form a majority.

What will happen in 2024? Some opinion polls are already predicting a surge in radical parties that are less European, on account of their results in recent national elections (in the Netherlands, Italy, Sweden, Finland and Hungary), some of which are aiming to upset the balance of power and thus create a new coalition.

Is this credible? The two main parties, even though they have been in decline for several years, remain at a higher level than the others (178 and 141 elected), and it would take a real earthquake to push them aside.

But within the seven existing political groups, a number of changes are taking place. Notably within the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), 67 elected members, party led by the President of the Italian Council, Giorgia Meloni, who would like to see themselves as kingmakers. They would like to upset the current balance and win over enough elected

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representatives to be in a position of strength and take part in future negotiations. To achieve this, they would need to pull well ahead of the Liberals, the current third political force. However, there are a number of weaknesses in this hypothesis. While Giorgia Meloni won the Italian parliamentary elections in 2022 at the head of a surprising coalition that included both Forza Italia (EPP) and the Lega (ID), her Polish counterparts in the PiS lost power in the parliamentary elections on 15 October 2023. The new Prime minister, Donald Tusk, former president of the EPP, has formed an alliance with the Liberals of Polska 2050 and the New Left, a replica of the current majority in the European Parliament.

In the same vein, the ID group (58 elected members) is hoping for very positive results, if possible overtaking ECR and even the Liberals. The recent success of the PVV in the Netherlands, and the strong polls for the AfD in Germany, the FPÖ in Austria and the RN in France, suggest that the results in 2024 will be better than in 2019, despite the lower score obtained by the Lega in Italy, which is currently the group's main delegation with 22 elected members.

But the great fragility of these calculations stems from the fact that these radical and populist parties do not sit in the same groups and do not always have the same electoral affinities, particularly with regard to Ukraine or Russia.

Their divisions are stronger than they appear, and it seems an illusion at present that they will manage to unite on any programme. For a long time, the members of the ID group have acted as a repellent, a pretext for the others (Fratelli d'Italia, PiS, Vox, Swedish Democrats, True Finns, Czech ODS and Belgian NVA) not to sit with them. The same applies to the 13 elected members of the Hungarian Fidesz party, who currently sit as non-attached members.

### A "contested" principle

In 2014, the European parties devised the *Spitzenkandidat* system ("head of list" in German) as a more democratic way of appointing the person to chair the European Commission. The aim was to strengthen

the link between citizens and the President of the Commission, who had historically been appointed by the European Council, and to encourage voters to cast their ballots in the European elections that take place every five years. By voting for a party, the electorate indirectly chose the holder of the presidency, which was to be entrusted to the leader of the party that came out ahead in the European elections. Each European party could therefore select its candidate in advance. This system has only been successfully tried out once, during the 2014 European elections. The *Spitzenkandidat* of the party that came out first, Luxembourg's Jean-Claude Juncker (European People's Party, EPP), became President of the European Commission.

This was not the case in 2019. Since Jean-Claude Juncker was not standing for re-election, the EPP chose Germany's Manfred Weber as its *Spitzenkandidat*. As the EPP had once again taken the lead in the European elections, its candidate might have hoped to enjoy the same outcome as in 2014. But Weber had not, like Juncker, been Prime Minister of his country for eighteen years. The heads of state and government therefore took over and, as provided for in the treaties, proposed a German woman from the EPP, Ursula von der Leyen, without her ever having been a candidate. This was strongly contested by the European Parliament and Ursula von der Leyen was narrowly elected.

At the time of writing, it cannot be ruled out that the outgoing President will stand for a second term. If this is the case and if the EPP takes the lead as forecast by some [polls](#), she might well be re-elected.

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In all likelihood, the traditional political groups (EPP, S&D) will still lose between six and twelve seats in this tenth European election, but they will each remain well over a hundred MEPs, which no other group seems able to achieve.

At the same time, some groups could make progress, notably the ECR, in which the Italian delegation is expected to increase by around twenty seats and could even become the majority delegation at the

expense of the Polish representation, which currently holds 27 seats.

Conversely, the expected surge in the ID group would not come from Italy or France, whose score in 2019 was already high, but rather from Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium or Austria.

These two groups seem to be in direct competition to see who will beat the other.

The referee could be Hungary's Fidesz, whose thirteen MEPs have been sitting on the non-attached benches since they left the EPP in 2021. It could also try to form a new group, which would require twenty-five elected members from seven Member States. Fidesz alone could have half that number if it repeats its 2019 score. Lastly, some groups might see their numbers dwindle. This could be the case for the Radical Left group. More unexpectedly, it could also be the case for the Greens, at a time when the ecological transition is such a hot topic. The tensions and concerns that this implies would not be unrelated to a poor result.

Then there is the case of the liberal group, Renew, which is currently the third largest political force in the European Parliament and a member of the current majority coalition. As this position of third force is highly coveted, its result will be particularly decisive as it combines the elected members of the

"French presidential majority" and the third partner in the German government coalition, known as Ampel. To date, most of the forces in this group seem to be struggling in the polls, even though the campaign has not yet begun. However, this group could see the arrival of a more substantial Polish delegation (compared with just one outgoing MEP), as the Polska 2050 party is a member of the new government coalition in Warsaw.

Ultimately, the political balance of power may not undergo any major upheaval, and the three current components of the European Parliament, even if reduced by around twenty seats and trailed by the populist parties, could still form a majority with over 400 seats out of 720.

The campaign must also be scrupulously monitored, with the question of foreign interference and online disinformation taking on greater importance, as several parliamentary [reports](#) have pointed out.

The European elections in June 2024 will be a wake-up call not only for the traditional political parties, but also for the European institutions, whose policies and governance cannot ignore the surge of doubts and protests we are witnessing in most Member States.

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