

# e EYES ON EUROPE

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**DECIDING  
EUROPE'S FUTURE**

# *Editors' notes*

The 2024 European elections will serve as a defining moment for the upcoming years, with the outcome undoubtedly shaping Europe's tone for the next legislature.

Forecasts, which predict an increase in the number of right and far-right Members of the European Parliament and simultaneously a decrease for left and green parties, paint a gloomy picture. This picture suggests a normalisation of right-wing forces in power on the European level, a trend that is already visible in numerous member states.

What is clear is that the outcome of the elections will fundamentally shape how the Union navigates the ongoing state of polycrisis. Yet, now more than ever, does the Union require large progressive forces in order for its crisis management to have sustainable outcomes for all European citizens. The upcoming elections might upset this necessity.

It is through a medium like Eyes on Europe, where an often overheard group, the students, are able to express their views and concerns regarding the state and the future of the European Union. The issues at stake are diverse but intertwined, and vary from democratic to environmental and socio economic concerns. A first step towards having people in charge that genuinely want to provide solutions to these problems is to make use of one's civil rights.

Hence, I encourage all of our readers to make use of their rights and to go out and vote during the European elections between the 6th and 9th of June!



**Luka Krauss**

*Editor in Chief*



Les élections sont des moments importants dans les sphères politiques mais pas seulement. Si elles sont le symbole d'une démocratie affirmée, le choix des citoyens lors de ces prochaines élections viendra représenter leur idéaux politiques.

Si les États d'Europe connaissent une montée des partis de droite et d'extrême-droite, il s'agira, pour ces prochaines élections et ce selon certains dirigeants européens d'un « conflit entre ceux qui prônent une Europe de l'égalité des droits et de l'environnement et ceux qui remettent en question les droits fondamentaux et défendent des positions qui sont contraires à celles de l'Europe. »

Notons également une majeure évolution pour les jeunes électeurs où le droit de vote s'est vu abaisser à l'âge de 16 ans dans certains pays européens. Sans pour autant que ce dernier soit obligatoire, il s'agit d'une autre façon de leur rappeler que leur voix compte également et quelle est toute aussi importante que le reste de la population. Et toutes les techniques pour motiver les jeunes à aller aux urnes sont, semble-t-il, permises. Car c'est récemment encore que l'idée d'utiliser la popularité et la notoriété d'artistes internationaux pour motiver les jeunes à aller aux urnes à vue le jour.

L'environnement et l'écologie seront également au rendez-vous, ces derniers fortement impactés par la guerre Russie/Ukraine et où les combustibles et l'énergie sont des nouveaux problèmes pour l'Europe.



**Léa Thyssens**

Rédactrice en chef

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***Politics,  
Elections,  
& the European***







# *Parliament*

Alvino Spinelli

#VisitEP

"I am convinced  
that my child  
will follow  
me."

"Sometimes,  
you just need to  
give a choice."

# La campagne électorale pour les européennes: les stratégies de la course vers 2024

Si vous aussi, cher lecteur, avez comme intérêt les affaires européennes, vous aurez sûrement déjà noté dans votre calendrier un des plus importants rendez-vous de cette nouvelle année. **Du 6 au 9 juin 2024 tous les citoyens européens seront appelés à voter pour leur nouveau Parlement.**

Le climat électoral est déjà dans l'air à Bruxelles et les députés sont en pleine campagne électorale. Les données des précédentes élections suggèrent pour ces élections une évolution positive. En 2019 on a enregistré une augmentation nette avec un taux de participation de 50.66%. Un tel résultat n'avait plus été atteint depuis plus d'une vingtaine d'années ; lors des premières élections...

Un résultat de cette envergure stimule les envies d'éviter un turnout négatif et d'impliquer le plus grand nombre de citoyen possible dans les prochaines élections. Il s'agit d'un moment important pour l'histoire européenne. Moment qui rassemble toutes les parties prenantes. Et où les institutions ne sont plus que les marionnettes des acteurs qui se mobilisent en cette occasion.

**Mais quelles sont les lignes directrices de l'UE en vue des élections?**

## Du Plan du 2018...

En 2018, le Président de la Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, avait déclaré que les institutions se seraient engagées pour garantir que tous les citoyens puissent voter leurs choix politiques dans des élections équitables, sûres et transparentes.

L'action de la Commission annoncée dans l'Etat de l'Union du 2018 concernait cinq domaines principaux: **la protection des données, la transparence, la coopération, la cybersécurité et les sanctions.**

A cet égard, deux points méritent d'être mis en évidence. Tout d'abord, la Commission a donné des indications aux partis pour assurer la transparence des publicités politiques. ▸





Autrement dit, les partis, les fondations et les organisations doivent rendre accessibles aux citoyens les informations financières relatives aux annonces en ligne et ils doivent clarifier quel parti les gère.

Un autre sujet au centre des recommandations de la Commission pour 2019 était le risque de menace cybernétique et les possibles interférences dans le processus électoral. En fait, la Commission a développé, en collaboration avec les autorités nationales et l'Agence européenne pour la Cyber-sécurité, un Compendium de lignes guides en cas de menace cybernétique.

L'accent mis par la Commission sur ces questions est une indication des priorités de l'UE pour la campagne.

### ... Au Democracy Action Plan

Ces priorités ont également été intégrées dans le European Democracy Action Plan présentée par la Commission en 2020. Le but du plan était de donner du pouvoir aux citoyens et construire des démocraties plus résilientes en Europe. En 2023 la Commission a révisé l'implémentation de la stratégie, qui sera intégrée dans le Defending European Democracy Pack-age proposé par Ursula Von Der Leyen dans le Working Program pour 2023. Le plan est centré sur trois piliers principaux: **“Protéger les élections libres et équitables”**; **“La liberté des médias et le pluralisme”** et **“Les mesures contre les interférences”**. La première ligne d'action - qui est en continuité avec les recommandations de 2018 - concerne la transparence du contenu politique sponsorisé et prévoit une révision du Règlement concernant les financements

pour les partis politiques européens.  
pour les partis politiques européens.

Le pilastre **“Liberté des médias et pluralisme”** regroupe les actions entreprises par la Commission au cours du 2022, notamment le **European Media Freedom Act** - un texte qui vise à protéger l'indépendance de l'information au niveau européen. Également, la ligne **“Lutter contre la désinformation”** met encore plus en évidence le risque de prolifération d'informations fausses et propose une extension des instruments à disposition de l'UE pour contraster les possibles interférences.

Les deux plans montrent la continuité de la stratégie de l'UE concernant les élections, notamment par rapport à deux thèmes principaux : la lutte contre la désinformation d'un côté, la transparence des partis de l'autre.

### Stratégies formelles et informelles

Tous ces principes constituent la boussole de la campagne électorale pour 2024. Comme mentionné précédemment, les institutions ont déjà commencé à planifier leur ligne communicative. La timeline présentée par la DG COMM, la Direction Générale pour la Communication de la Commission, confirme cette information: dès mars 2023, toutes les activités d'arrière-plan utiles à la campagne électorale ont été déployées (CSOs, influenceurs, visiteurs).

Le rôle de la DG COMM est d'informer les citoyens sur les pouvoirs législatifs du Parlement Européen et sur l'importance de l'engagement démocratique. ▀

Parmi elles, il y a par exemple le **European Youth Event**, un network qui rassemble le Parlement de Strasbourg et des milliers de jeunes pour partager des idées sur le futur de l'Union Européenne. Mais il y a toute une constellation d'initiatives de sensibilisation au niveau européen. Un autre exemple est le **Together.eu**, un projet du Parlement Européen qui vise à impliquer les citoyens dans la vie démocratique européenne et les persuader de l'importance de voter.

Ces exemples montrent que, dans cette période, nous assistons à une prolifération d'activités et d'événements qui tournent autour des élections. Il ne s'agit donc pas d'une simple course, mais d'un véritable marathon.

### La digitalisation de la campagne électorale: pour et contre

L'intérêt de l'UE vers le règlement de l'aspect digital de la campagne électorale n'est pas injustifié. Selon le rapport de la Commission sur les élections de 2019, la campagne s'est déroulée surtout en ligne et les citoyens ont cherché les informations principalement sur internet. On pourrait dire que la pandémie n'a fait qu'accélérer ce phénomène et que le monde politique n'échappe pas à cette transformation. L'Affaire Tik Tok est un exemple clair de la perception par les institutions de l'utilisation abusive des médias. Cette année encore, l'UE a vivement conseillé à ses employés de désinstaller l'application de leurs appareils professionnels afin d'éviter la diffusion de données sensibles. En effet, il est indéniable qu'il existe un risque d'exploitation politique par les grandes

entreprises des données personnelles dont elles disposent à travers les médias.

Pendant l'utilisation d'internet pour les élections présente aussi plusieurs avantages. Tout d'abord, la numérisation du débat politique permet de développer une dimension européenne de débat distincte, surmontant ainsi l'étiquette d'élections de second ordre souvent attribuée aux élections européennes. En plus, les médias sont aussi un outil important en ce qui concerne la sensibilisation des plus jeunes envers les questions électorales, ces derniers restent un canal à privilégier pour interagir avec la Génération Z. Dans un monde de plus en plus numérisé, internet est une arme à double tranchant qui, si bien gérée, permettrait d'élargir le débat et d'impliquer encore plus de citoyens en 2024.

En conclusion, l'UE s'est engagée dans une stratégie claire, mais en défendant la transparence et la protection de l'information publique, elle est confrontée à un environnement mouvant où les acteurs et les menaces sont multiples. Un scénario variable, qui rend ce marathon de 2024 encore plus important pour l'avenir de l'Europe.



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# Rise and fall of great powers: is Europe still up to date?

As the 2024 elections loom on the horizon, the international stage awaits a recalibration of Europe's position. It is not only the year of European elections, but there will also be elections in the US and other major countries like India, South Africa and Mexico, with more than 70 countries going to the ballot box. This could result in a major change of scenarios and shifts in leadership and governments, and one can only speculate on how this will affect the future of democracy. Now, more than ever, is the time for introspection: what aspects of the European project demand improvement? This article delves into the intricacies of the European Union, seeking to identify potential vulnerabilities and proposing avenues for constructive change.

Max Weber once argued that bureaucracy stands as the most efficient and rational means of organising human activity. He emphasised the indispensability of systematic processes and organised hierarchies in maintaining societal order. Europe, a conglomerate of 27 states collaborating under the banner of a common cause, epitomises bureaucratic governance on an unprecedented scale:

**is Europe able to face the challenges of this multipolar and complex world?**

Externally, the rise of global powerhouses challenges the EU's ability to assert itself in an asymmetric and multipolar world. The concept of "weaponised interdependence" highlights the vulnerability of the EU, which lacks the state-like capabilities of its counterparts. As the U.S. and China wield influence through global hubs, the EU must redefine its role to remain relevant.

The rise of new geopolitical challenges, exacerbated by the two main current wars that are reversing their consequences on Europe, necessitates a reassessment of Europe's internal dynamics and external standing. The traditional closed-door approach to crafting political manifestos is being reevaluated. Acknowledging the evolving political landscape, European parties are actively seeking external input, a departure from the insider-exclusive norm. The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), under the leadership of German Renew MEP Svenja Hahn, boldly declares that "the era of copy-pasting manifestos is over". This move towards inclusivity, evident in town halls and online portals, reflects an awareness of the need to bridge the gap between political elites and everyday citizens.

Yet, the inherent challenge lies in maintaining the delicate balance between openness and efficacy. The Party of European Socialists' extensive consultation process, engaging with NGOs and unions, highlights a commitment to substantive engagement. However, as the nexus between party manifestos and European Commission priorities remains a potent force, the EU must navigate the potential influence of corporate ▀

lobbyists and NGOs on policy outcomes.

Populism, another challenge for democracy, is gaining new allies, election after election. The most recent example is the Dutch case of Geert Wilders, the “precursor of European populism”, also known as the founder of the anti-immigration rhetoric, which inspired many far-right politicians all over Europe. By distrusting globalisation and international institutions, including the EU, and asserting the need for national sovereignty and values, populism has been giving easy answers to complicated issues. The logical reaction is sheltering into a party that can give stability and surety: consequently, new far-right governments emerged in Europe, as seen in Italy with Giorgia Meloni, uniting with pre-existing governments like in Hungary. Even the supposedly very democratic North, where nationalist parties support the current governments, as seen in Sweden and Finland, exhibits a discouraging and somehow threatening dynamic.

However, as seen with Poland, there is some form of wishful thinking, but is the Polish case just a fluke? Will the spread of populist trends have an impact in the next European elections? How much of a threat does it pose for the European Union?

The 2024 elections will serve as a litmus test, evaluating whether Europe can redefine its political participation. The success of this recalibration will determine whether Europe can not only address immediate challenges but also assert its relevance in a world undergoing rapid transformation. In the face of global uncertainties, the EU's ability to adapt and engage with its citizens will shape its trajectory. The rise and fall of great powers hinge not only on historical legacies, but on the capacity to evolve and meet contemporary challenges. As the 2024 elections unfold, Europe stands at a crossroad, with the opportunity to rejuvenate its purpose and redefine its role in an ever-changing geopolitical landscape.



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# 5 years of von der Leyen Commission: Promises kept on European Democracy?

***I firmly believe we must improve the lead candidate, or Spitzenkandidaten system together. [...] we should also address the issue of transnational lists in the European elections [...] The new rules should be in place well in time for the European elections of 2024, for greater transparency and democratic legitimacy***

**- Ursula von der Leyen, Political Guidelines for the next European Commission 2019-2024**

In her political guidelines for the 2019-2024 term of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen highlighted these two key commitments aimed at strengthening European democracy. These pledges were articulated during her campaign and presented before the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) as part of the groundwork for her investiture vote for the position of President of the European Commission in 2019.

As a Commission candidate solely nominated by the European Council, the nomination of Ursula von der Leyen faced heavy scepticism from the MEPs. This is particularly due to the fact that her appointment caused the side lining of the two lead EU-wide contenders for the top post, Manfred Weber from the European People's Party (EPP) and Frans Timmermans from the Party of European Socialists (PES).

So not only did her nomination put a premature end to the Spitzenkandidaten procedure and the linked hopes for a more democratic and EU-wide election procedure, but it also demonstrated once more the firm power grip of the member states and their disregard for the EU citizen's vote. To add insult to injury, this happened amid the first increase in voter turnout since 1979.

Consequently, Ursula von der Leyen had to offer concessions to secure a majority of votes in the European Parliament, which was necessary in order to secure her investiture as President of the European Commission. To that end, she promised to take the Spitzenkandidaten principle as well as transnational lists across the legislative finish line before the next EU elections in 2024. ▀



But before assessing what happened in the last four years, it is important to showcase why the EU would benefit from an electoral reform.

Today, European Parliament elections are still considered as second-order elections by citizens, enjoying less relevance than domestic elections. Even more, the individual campaigns in the run-up to the European elections are heavily dominated by national topics. At the same time, more and more competences are being transferred to the EU level without creating the necessary democratic accountability loop, therefore reinforcing the perceived distance between EU citizens and EU decision-making.

To tackle this growing distance and boost voter turnout in EU elections, the European Parliament and the Council amended the European Electoral Act in 2018. Still, the limited reforms failed to address two major shortcomings hindering true EU-wide European Parliament election.

**But what are these two main issues?**

## The Spitzenkandidaten system

After a looming democratic fatigue of EU citizens with their EU institutions, a first wave of Euroscepticism at the end of the 2000s and more technocratic Commission presidents, the call for democratising the post of the EU Commission President, one of the most powerful positions in Europe, grew louder and louder. The idea was to give citizens a say in deciding who should be their presumptive Commission President and to fight the continuously shrinking EU election turnout.

And what seemed to be a very politically shaky idea in the EU Elections 2014 proved to be solid due to a mix of cross-party support within the European Parliament, the lack of a blocking minority in the European Council, as well as a popular lead candidate with decade-long government experience, namely Jean-Claude Juncker from the EPP. This was the first time that the Spitzenkandidaten principle has been implemented, with the lead candidate from the winning party becoming Commission President.

**All ends well?** Well, in the 2019 European Elections, the chain of cross-institutional support proved to be fragile. Here, the lead candidates nominated by the European parties had to step aside for Ursula von der Leyen from the German CDU/EPP. The hand-picked choice by the European Council buried the principle, for now.

But already before was the Spitzenkandidaten procedure showing a significant structural deficiency.

Even though it was promoted as an EU-wide lead candidate campaign process, the candidates were officially only listed on their national ballot lists. Meaning that despite Jean-Claude Juncker (EPP) and Martin Schulz (PES) in 2014 and Manfred Weber (EPP) and Frans Timmermans (PES) in 2019 were running as lead candidates and campaigning all over the EU, on the election day, their names only appeared on their national ballots in their home countries.

**But how can EU-wide lead candidates and even MEPs claim democratic legitimacy across the EU when they are not listed in every member state for all EU citizens to vote? ▸**

## Transnational lists

This leads us to the second most pressing democratic flaw that the EU electoral system is facing. The lack of EU-wide transnational lists.

Looking at the current electoral system, each national party competes on their own national lists, under the umbrella of their respective European political party. The only concession the Council gave so far is to have the respective EU political party's logo on the national ballot lists.

While the media fixation on the Spitzenkandidat principle remains high, the concept cannot be thought-through without the introduction of transnational EU lists. Even if there were lead candidates for the next elections, not being represented on EU-wide ballot lists would prevent the full spirit of the Spitzenkandidaten idea from unfolding.

### But why should there be transnational lists and how would it work?

The idea is simple, each EU citizen would have two votes. One vote for candidates nominated by the national parties, the second for candidates from the European political parties overseeing different EU-wide constituencies.

This would reinforce European democracy and pave the way for universal EU suffrage of MEPs and eventually the Commission President, elected from the ranks of the European Parliament, like in every democratic parliamentary system. The identification, particularly with the lead candidates of the European parties and the eventual Commission President, could be guaranteed all over the EU.

Instead, EU elections today contain 27 national contests, mainly focused around national party lead candidates and domestic policy issues varying in each country. This lack of coherent identification leads to EU topics being overshadowed by domestic policy and elections being used by citizens to cast protest votes and display their dissatisfaction with their national government, instead of voicing their political opinion on the future of the EU.

Even more, the fact that MEPs run exclusively on their national party lists creates a dangerous dependency from the national party, bringing MEPs into a possible conflict of interest between EU and national party goals. Transnational lists would therefore guarantee that the MEPs could fulfil their mandate in the interest of the entire EU without fearing backlash from their national party in the run-up to the next election.

All in all, the combination of an electoral procedure for lead candidates running on EU-wide transnational ballots would give the EU citizens a simple and clear understanding of EU elections while boosting democratisation, pan-EU accountability, and voter turnout.

Four years later and slowly approaching the final year of von der Leyen's Commission term, it is therefore time to reflect: **What has been achieved and what still needs to be done ?**

Here, a pessimistic picture emerges. Again, both proposals were taken up by the Conference on the Future of Europe, a Commission-launched series of debates in 2021 and 2022. ▀

And again, the final report called for transnational lists as well as the election of the Commission President by the Spitzenkandidaten procedure or via direct elections.

But until today, the Commission has not delivered. While the European Parliament pushed for both proposals, the EU member states in the Council eventually refuted the idea in December 2022.

Of course, the Commission and its President cannot be fully blamed for the failure of a more democratic and European electoral system being put in place. A big part of the letdown is due to the member states letting the proposal fail.

However, neither the Commission nor President von der Leyen took the political risk over the past 5 years to actively campaign for a substantial democratic reform within the EU, consequently letting down hopes for real pan-European elections taking place in 2024.

**“The record-high turnout in the 2019 European elections shows the vibrancy of our democracy. We must respond to that call by giving Europeans a stronger role in decision-making.**

**We will go further than ever before to make this happen”,** von der Leyen promised in 2019.

A broken promise that had secured her the appointment to the job in the first place.

Looking ahead, the EU citizens are tumbling again into the EU elections in 2024, without any guarantee that the winner of the election becomes President of the Commission, without any possibility to vote for neither EU-wide campaigning MEPs nor political parties. And with an electoral system in place that lacks clarity and simplicity for the ordinary citizen.

**The calls for a greater say of EU citizens in EU democracy will only grow.** A call that the next Commission must pick up - or risk further estrangement from its citizens.



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# The future of the European Green Deal in light of the 2024 elections

**The countdown to the 2024 European Parliament elections has begun, with its outcome possibly having a considerable impact on the survival of the European Green Deal and the success of the European Union's transition towards a greener future.**

The 2019 European elections were a turning point for the European Union's environmental and climate policy. The polls showed a remarkable increase in support for Green parties across the EU, reflecting a growing concern among European citizens for climate change and environmental degradation. Following these elections, the Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA) made an impressive jump from 52 to 74 seats, becoming the fourth-largest group in the European Parliament.

During Ursula von der Leyen's presidency of the European Commission, the European Green Deal has emerged as one of the EU's key priorities. Under her leadership, a series of critical environmental policies gained approval and came into force. This was partly due to the support of a newly elected, greener Parliament, which helped cement the EU's commitment towards achieving climate neutrality. Notably, this encompasses the adoption of the EU Climate Law, a regulation translating the objectives of the European Green Deal into legally binding targets. These targets include reducing the Union's emissions by 55% until 2030 and achieving climate neutrality by 2050.

As per this law, the European Commission is also required to propose, during the first half of 2024, an additional emission reduction target for the year 2040.

The results of the 2024 European elections hold considerable importance for the fulfilment of the European Green Deal. Indeed, the incoming MEPs will hold their seats until mid-2029, just a stone's throw away from 2030, which constitutes the first intermediate deadline set by the EU Climate Law. The future composition of the Parliament will determine the level of ambition of the EU's climate and environmental policies. Moreover, even if Ursula von der Leyen secures a second term in the European Commission, she may face a completely different political landscape, potentially hindering the realisation of her objectives.

Indeed, the most recent opinion polls hint at a strong downturn in support for the Greens/EFA compared to the previous election. Conversely, the conservative bloc is on the rise, fuelled by the ascent of nationalist and Eurosceptic parties. This shift is attributed partly to the increased discontent surrounding the EU's



ambitious environmental policy, and to the strategy of the populist parties, which has shifted from pledges to quit the EU to denouncing climate policies and their costs for societies.

The upcoming months will be particularly crucial to reverse this trend. The Commission faces a dilemma: upholding the commitment to the EU's environmental goals by pushing for a series of stringent regulations before the end of the term, or scale back ambitions to reassure citizens and prevent reinforcing the arguments being put forth by Eurosceptic parties.

The first option seems challenging. As the EU progresses with the strategy outlined by the European Green Deal, policies proposed by the Commission are progressively becoming more ambitious, spurring increased controversy among politicians. A growing segment in the European Parliament is voicing discontent regarding the latest environmental proposals. The backlash extends even to the largest political group in Parliament and Ursula von der Leyen's political family, the European People's Party (EPP). Led by the German conservative Manfred Weber, the EPP has

called for a break in enacting new green laws, emphasising the need to consider their potential economic consequences. Likewise, European Parliament President Roberta Metsola voiced concern that the recent ambitious climate and industrial regulations were pushing voters towards populist and Eurosceptic parties. The backlash is not limited to the European Parliament. Several heads of state, including Alexander De Croo or Emmanuel Macron, have called for a regulatory break regarding the implementation of new environmental policies at the European level.

Importantly, right-leaning MEPs came remarkably close earlier this year to successfully obstructing the Nature Restoration Law, a law aimed at restoring at least 20% of the EU's land, river and sea areas by 2030. The law was adopted only by a thin margin in the European Parliament, with the help of the EPP's more progressive members. Furthermore, the departure of Frans Timmermans, former European Commission Executive Vice-President responsible for overseeing the European Green Deal, presents another challenge.

▀



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One of the most fervent supporters of the European Green Deal exits the scene, potentially hampering efforts to successfully pass new and ambitious green initiatives.

Recently, Ursula von der Leyen appeared to lean towards the second option, namely dialling down on her ambitious environmental plans and prioritising consensus-building. In her State of the Union speech last September, she notably refrained from mentioning any new or ongoing legislative efforts, omitting from her speech the EU's 2040 emission reduction target that the Commission is legally obliged to present in the first half of 2024, right before the elections. Rather than delving into future regulations, von der Leyen directed her attention primarily towards implementation, specifically in the industrial sector. This shift echoes the evolving discourse on the European Green Deal over the past few years. Moving from the sole emphasis on achieving climate neutrality, the narrative has gradually evolved, increasingly highlighting the importance of sustainable growth and green competitiveness. This shift in focus appears to be a deliberate effort to reassure and appeal to a wider array of stakeholders across the political spectrum, and to secure wider acceptance of the European Green Deal. Nonetheless, it remains unclear whether this change also serves as a strategy to gather greater support before the 2024 European elections.

Nearing the 2024 European elections, Ursula von der Leyen and the European Commission seem to have opted for persuasion rather than resolute commitment. This strategy is aimed at ensuring sufficient support to safeguard the European Green Deal's survival,

but multiple uncertainties persist. Firstly, there might be a gap between von der Leyen's apparent reduced ambition, and the imminence of environmental regulations.

For instance, the European Commission is still bound by the EU Climate Law to propose a limit on emissions for 2040.

Moreover, the effectiveness of this strategy remains unknown. On the one hand, while ambitious EU environmental policy has been associated to the rise of support for nationalist and Eurosceptic parties, a causal relationship has not been confirmed. It is therefore unsure whether a regulatory break may achieve to reverse this trend, especially this close to the elections. On the other hand, even if the pace of environmental regulation slows down, it is uncertain whether the EPP, the leading party in the European Parliament, will keep supporting the EU's green agenda following growing discontent in its ranks. Finally, it is important to note the potential impact of a regulatory break from an environmental perspective. Delaying climate action amidst urgent climate change and environmental degradation could have significant and unforeseen environmental repercussions.



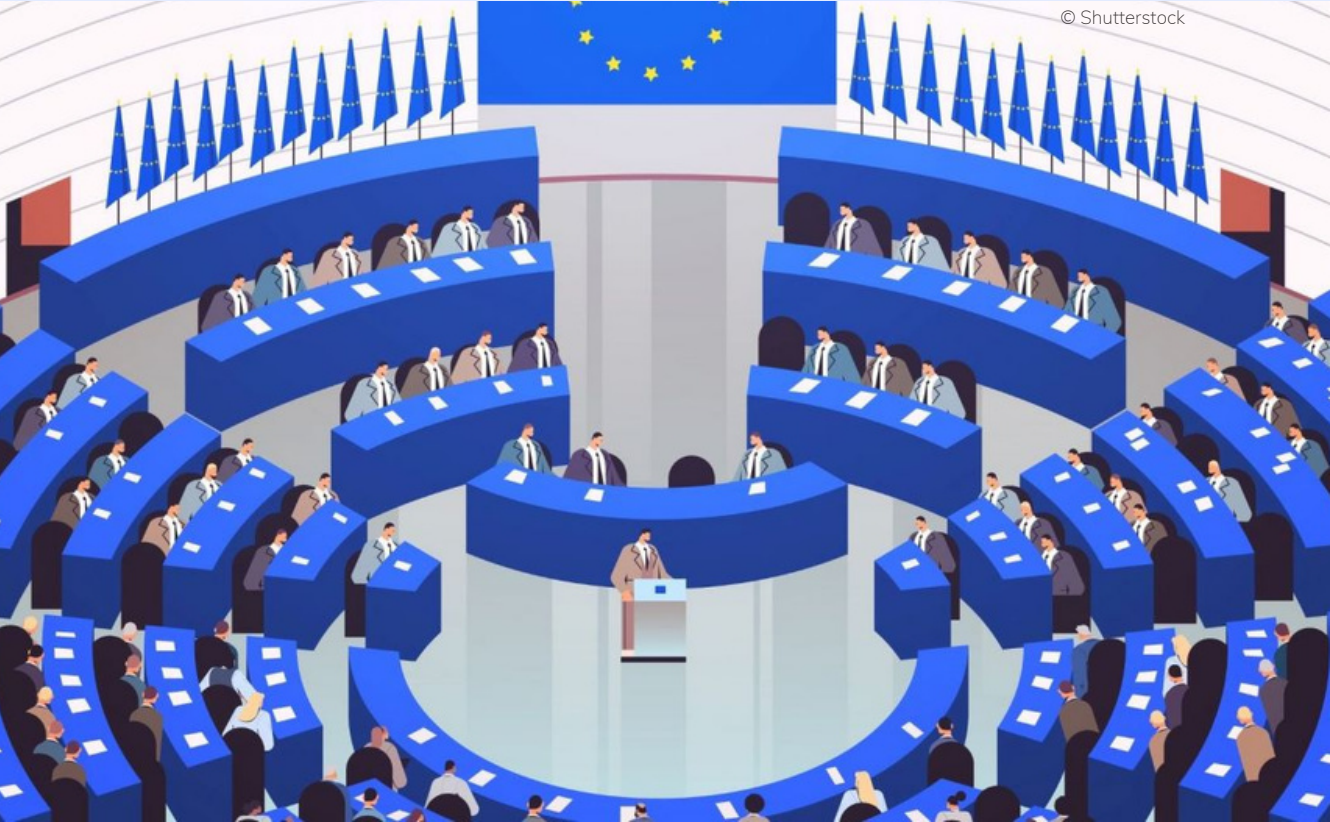
**Hélène Pétré**

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# The Key Issues in the 2024 European Elections:



## An Analysis of Evolving Policy Priorities

The 2024 European Parliament elections are shaping up to be a momentous moment in the history of the European Union. As the election date approaches, political priorities are undergoing a significant shift, driven by a series of challenges and crises that have shaken the continent over the past decade.

Although at the time of writing, we do not yet have information on the publication of the different party manuscripts, some of the policy lines that will be followed in the European elections can already be glimpsed.

## New Complex Political Cycle

**"No nation can do it alone in the age of global interdependence,"** said José Manuel Barroso, former president of the European Commission. These words resonate with the very essence of the European elections, where cooperation and solidarity among nations become imperative.

The year 2024 is shaping up to be a significant milestone for Europe, marked by the European elections that inaugurate a new political cycle in a highly complex post-pandemic scenario. The statement by Josep Borrell, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, on an increasingly multipolar world underlines the challenges facing the European Union in creating narratives and projects that adapt to this global evolution.

The EU is experiencing a weakening of its external presence, especially vis-à-vis the countries of the Global South, where Russian and Chinese influences are most pronounced. In the Western Balkans, confidence in the EU persists among aspirant countries, although dissatisfaction might increase due to the stalled accession process. In addition, the recent reputational crisis, aggravated by the escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, has generated divisions among and within member states. These challenges will shape strategies and messages in the European Parliament elections, which therefore might appear atypical compared to previous elections.

On the other hand, polarisation has reached the political sphere in Brussels and Strasbourg, evidenced by a more tense than usual last State of the EU.

It is increasingly common to observe Members of the European Parliament using their seats to address national issues, reflecting a change in traditional dynamics. Even routine matters, such as hearings to appoint new commissioners, have taken on a more contentious tone, highlighting the growing tensions in EU decision-making and political representation. These factors contribute to the complexity of the new political landscape that will define the direction of the European Parliament in the coming years.

## Difficulties in connecting with European Citizenship

One of the main challenges attributed to the EU, seen as a post-national constellation, is its difficulty in connecting with citizens. This is due to the association of political representation with national sovereignty and the perception of the EU as a set of opaque and distant institutions. The enigma of the EU lies in its particular characteristics. Jacques Delors described it as an unidentified political object, which complicates its understanding. The machinery is complex, involving agreements between many actors, and it is slow to operate in a fast-paced world.

Therefore, citizens might seem to feel like it does not really work. This perception is reinforced by the challenge of translating the EU's complex decision-making processes and policy outcomes into tangible improvements in citizens' lives. The intricate nature of EU governance, involving multiple institutions and negotiations among member states, can create a

perception of inefficiency and distance. Additionally, the indirect link between EU policies and national implementation can contribute to a sense of detachment, making it difficult for citizens to attribute positive developments or address their concerns directly to the EU.

## EU Evolution?

One of the most pressing issues in the 2024 European elections is the future of the European Green Deal and the Union's climate policies. Despite the von der Leyen Commission's efforts to achieve climate neutrality by 2050, uncertainty persists over whether the next Commission and European Parliament will keep these commitments and achieve the crucial 2030 targets needed to address the most severe impacts of climate change.

The prominence of the centre-right European People's Party (EPP) persists, reflecting the political dynamics of 2019. The emergence of more conservative and sceptical right-wing parties, such as Fratelli d'Italia in the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) family, raises questions. The most crucial question is whether these parties will advocate a conservative Europe, co-existing with liberal and progressive forces and maintaining a form of continuity with the Green Deal. Or, conversely, whether they will seek to form a new coalition of right-wing parties seeking to dismantle the Green Deal, while simultaneously facing challenges in reaching a majority due to their divergent views on climate policy.

Migration policy is emerging as a crucial issue in the electoral landscape, according to an EPP source who spoke

to Euronews. In addition to the war in Ukraine and the ecological transition, immigration is expected to be a central point of debate during the campaign. The EPP has stated its position in favour of making the construction of external border fences eligible for EU funding, putting forward measures to tackle the behaviour of countries such as Turkey and Belarus, who exploit immigration for political purposes.

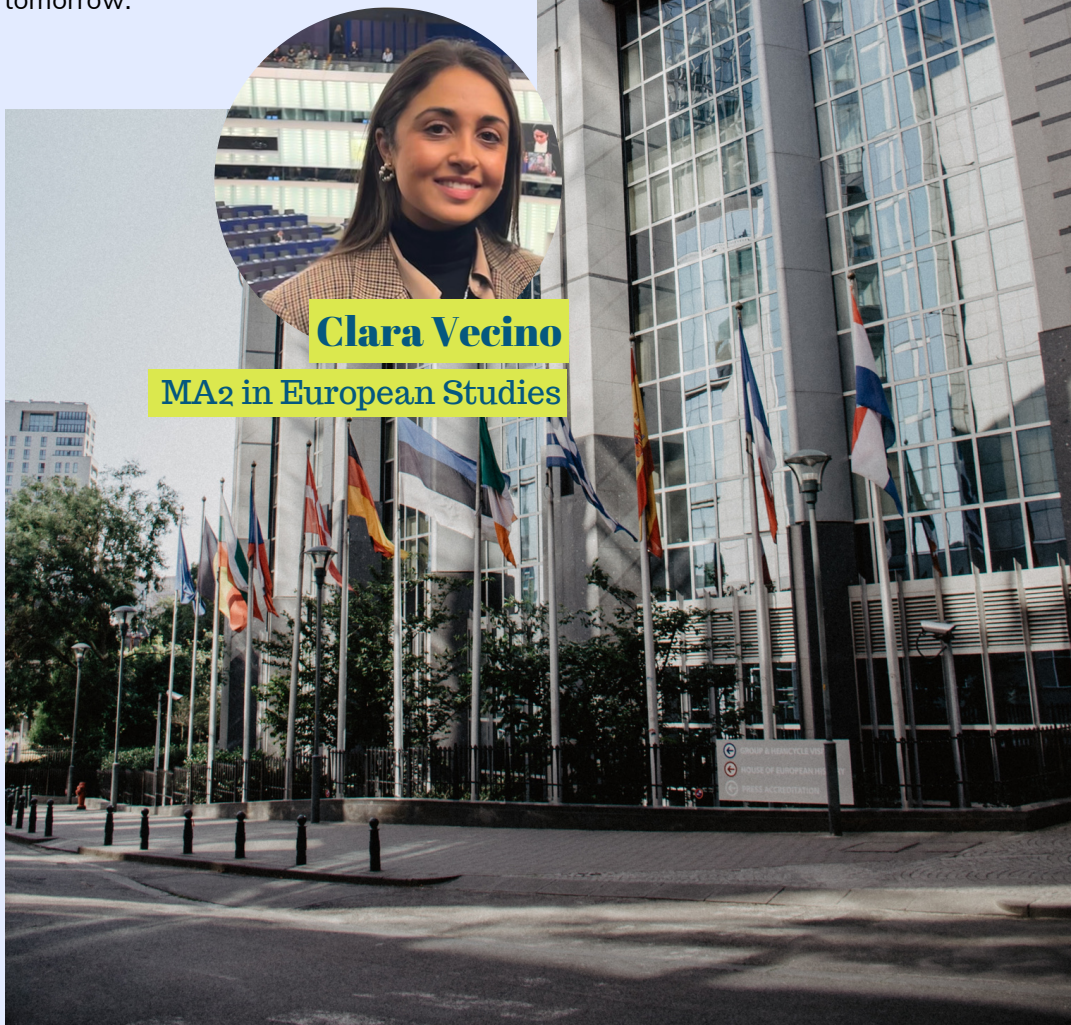
Although the European Commission has so far not funded fences or walls, the issue of migration, especially across the Mediterranean, has gained prominence. The European Parliament recently adopted migration-related proposals in the hope that EU countries would find an agreement before the elections, preventing the issue from dominating the campaigns. The prospect of a stronger EPP policy on migration, brought forward by its president, Manfred Weber, underlines the potential importance that the issue might have in the upcoming elections.

A look at Europe's financial rules and deepening integration in defence and health care will go a long way. The major parties are likely to be seen as the most competent to deal with high inflation. Although inflation has declined in recent months, Eurobarometer reveals that half of those surveyed believe their standard of living has fallen, suggesting that inflation and the cost of living will be key considerations for voters. Despite the uncertainty, the importance of the European Union at this juncture is noted, raising the possibility that the election will focus more on European policies than on national issues, although this will depend on the volatility in member states and possible unexpected ▀



developments in the coming year.

These elections are crucial to ensure true strategic autonomy and prepare the EU for future crises, which are becoming increasingly virulent. Against this background, the climate crisis will shape the course of European efforts and European policies for the next legislation. **Each vote represents a conscious choice towards a more sustainable and resilient future**, reflecting the global interdependence that Barroso highlighted. The conclusion is clear: the European Union is at a turning point, and commitment to climate priorities should stand as a fundamental pillar in building a shared and prosperous tomorrow.



**Clara Vecino**

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# Renew: Faiseur de Rois ou Fauteur de Trouble?

**Le groupe parlementaire Renew jouit jusqu'à présent du titre du faiseur de rois dans les négociations au sein du Parlement Européen. Tantôt recherchés par les eurodéputés sociaux-démocrates, ou ceux issus des chrétiens-démocrates, les libéraux pourraient perdre cette position avantageuse au profit des députés de droite nationaliste, si les estimations faites par les sondages venaient à se réaliser.**

L'alliance des Libéraux et Démocrates Européens, rebaptisée Renew Europe après les dernières élections européennes, est le troisième plus grand groupe politique de l'hémicycle européen. Alors que la formation politique obtient son meilleur score en 2019, les sondages prédisent pour l'instant un recul du nombre de sièges Renew après les élections de juin 2024.

## Toujours sur le Podium

Les députés siégeant sur les bancs de Renew Europe (formation des europartis: L'Alliance des Libéraux et Démocrates pour l'Europe (ALDE) et Parti Démocrate Européen (PDE) ndlr) sont au nombre de cent-un. D'après les sondages réalisés par le média spécialisé en actualité européenne POLITICO, les projections de votes en novembre 2023, feraient chuter ce nombre à quatre-vingt-sept sièges.

D'après les mêmes sondages, si les libéraux-démocrates parviennent à rester la troisième force politique, ils sont suivis de très près par les formations de droite conservatrice et nationaliste : Conservateurs et réformistes européens (ECR) et Identité et Démocratie (ID),

avec respectivement quatre-vingt un et soixante-dix-neuf sièges, contre une soixantaine actuellement. La victoire de sièges supplémentaires pour les partis idéologiquement à l'extrême droite de l'échiquier politique risquerait d'abattre de nouvelles stratégies au sein du Parlement Européen.

Pour faire passer des textes, les deux groupes majoritaires du Parlement Européen, Parti Populaire Européen (PPE) et Alliance progressiste des socialistes et démocrates au Parlement européen (S&D), s'appuient régulièrement sur le groupe Renew pour former des coalitions. Avec une chambre des représentants très clairement bleue, le PPE pourrait décider de trouver de nouveaux alliés chez les eurodéputés ECR ou ID plutôt qu'avec les partis situés à sa gauche. Pour l'heure, les jeux ne sont pas faits, mais la baisse de popularité des libéraux est actée.

## La chute de l'Empire Espagnol

Les élections nationales sont un bon indicateur pour établir les scrutins à venir. La plus grande délégation au sein de Renew est la délégation française, composée des partis de la majorité ▀





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présidentielle d'Emmanuel Macron, Renaissance, Horizons et le Modem. Les dernières élections législatives ont conféré une majorité plus relative au président français. Le parti Renaissance est ainsi passé de plus de la moitié, à un peu moins d'un tiers des sièges de l'Assemblée nationale. C'est donc sans surprise que les sondages publiés par l'IFOP, institut d'étude d'opinion publique, indiquent une légère baisse des intentions de vote des Français pour un candidat sur la liste Renew par rapport à 2019.

La délégation espagnole, quant à elle, est plus en danger. Sur les sept membres espagnols qui composent Renew Europe, cinq sont issus du parti Ciudadanos. Aux élections municipales de mai dernier, le score de Ciudadanos était de 1,35%, contre presque 9% en 2019. Il se pourrait donc bien que les députés libéraux perdent cinq euro-députés espagnols en juin prochain,

soit la majeure partie de leur délégation espagnole. En plus de perdre des sièges au profit d'autres formations politiques, la quasi disparition des députés espagnols, deuxième force en nombre au sein de Renew Europe, pourrait réchauffer les rivalités entre les parlementaires allemands, qui reprendraient la seconde place, et les français, qui se disputent le leadership politique.

***le FDP est en désaccord  
avec la direction du groupe  
sur de nombreux sujets,  
tout particulièrement ceux  
qui sont particulièrement  
importants en ce moment***



En début d'année, des tensions politiques sont apparues clairement entre les eurodéputés français et allemands du groupe. Quand on s'intéresse aux rapport des sessions plénières, on constate que sur l'accord provisoire portant sur les normes d'émissions de CO2 pour les voitures et les camionnettes, l'ensemble des eurodéputés allemands a voté contre, alors que l'eurogroupe avait appelé à voter pour. Les tensions s'échauffent entre le Parti libéral-démocrate allemand (FDP) et les autres partis de Renew. « Nous pouvons clairement affirmer que le FDP est en désaccord avec la direction du groupe sur de nombreux sujets, tout particulièrement ceux qui sont particulièrement importants en ce moment », a confié Davide Ferrari, directeur de recherche au sein de la plateforme de recherche sur la politique européenne EU Matrix, au média Euractiv.

L'Allemagne est un pays avec une forte industrie automobile. C'est donc le biais national que les MEPs (Membres du Parlement Européen en anglais ndr) allemands ont privilégié, ce qui n'est pas une exception du groupe Renew Europe. Pour autant, ce non-alignement n'en est qu'un parmi tant d'autres, car si l'on en croit les études d'EU Matrix sur les trois principaux groupes du Parlement Européen (PPE, S&D et Renew Europe), cinq des neuf partis les moins alignés aux votes du groupe, siègent sur les bancs des libéraux-démocrates. Le FDP illustre une scission entre une aile Renew davantage portée sur les questions environnementales et une plus réticente, ce qui se joue aussi sur le plan économique, avec un clan mené par les Français en faveur d'une fiscalité flexible et un FDP plus rigoriste. En effet, d'après les chiffres d'EU Matrix sur les dynamiques intra-Renew, les eurodéputés FDP sont

les moins alignés avec le groupe, après les euro-députés tchèques, sur les questions de régulation du marché.

## Fauteur de trouble idéologique?

En tant qu'eurogroupe se définissant comme centriste, Renew Europe représente plusieurs courants idéologiques. Stéphane Séjourné, président du groupe, explique dans une interview accordée à la chaîne Youtube du parti espagnol Ciudadanos Europa, que Renew est une alliance des « sociaux-démocrates libéraux et de la droite libérale non-conservatrice. » faisant de sa « priorité absolue la vision démocratique qui est celle de l'Europe ». Pourtant, l'euro-groupe est composé de certains députés n'étant pas réellement en accord avec la vision europhile de Stéphane Séjourné.

La délégation tchèque, représentée par les députés ANO ("Oui" en tchèque), s'inscrit bien plus à droite que « le centre européen » de Stéphane Séjourné. Depuis qu'il a rejoint ALDE en 2014, le parti de l'ancien Premier ministre tchèque, Andrej Babiš, a glissé petit à petit vers des positions de droite conservatrice. L'ancien homme d'État s'est affiché plusieurs fois aux côtés de Viktor Orbán, eurosceptique notoire, et n'a pas hésité à qualifier le Parlement Européen « d'institution inutile », alors que l'intéressé faisait l'objet d'une enquête parlementaire pour conflit d'intérêt sur l'attribution de fonds d'aides européens. Si deux eurodéputées, Dita Charanzová et Martina Dlabajová, ont confié à Euractiv qu'elles ne se présenteraient pas aux prochaines élections sous l'étiquette du parti ANO, qu'advient-il des trois autres membres du Parlement Européen ? ▀



Ces derniers ayant davantage flirté avec la ligne conservatrice, eurosceptique du parti en ne prenant pas part par exemple, au vote d'une résolution concernant la violation de l'état de droit en Hongrie. Pourtant, dans une vidéo de l'euro-groupe sur le bilan de l'année 2022, le groupe se targue d'avoir "lutté contre la corruption et l'attaque des institutions démocratiques par les gouvernements polonais et hongrois".

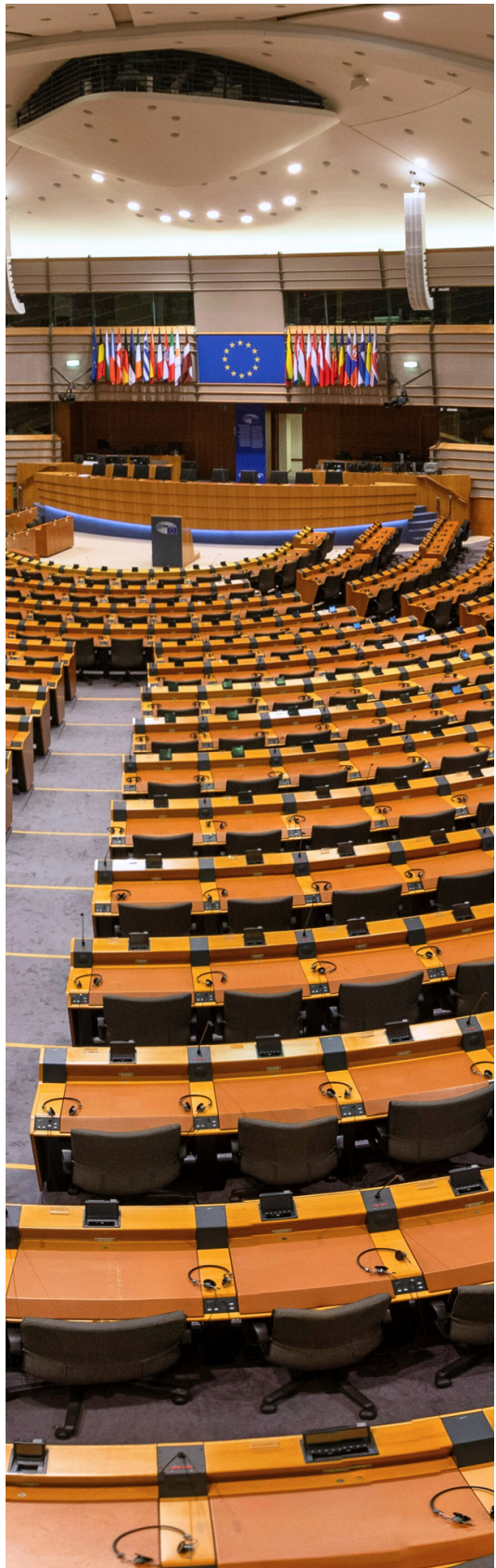
Alors, deux questions se posent. Que se passera-t-il si le parti nationaliste ANO remporte davantage de sièges aux élections européennes de juin 2024 et décide de continuer à siéger au sein de l'ALDE? L'ALDE et donc Renew pourraient-ils écarter les députés tchèques et renoncer à des sièges?

L'éclatement idéologique de Renew Europe est visible dans plusieurs euro-groupes, car ils représentent des sensibilités politiques européennes différentes, mais les tensions qui en découlent nuisent à la crédibilité et à la capacité de l'eurogroupe à faire politique. C'est donc à ces tensions que devra répondre Renew Europe si le groupe souhaite conserver son statut de faiseur de rois contre la montée des partis d'extrême-droite.



**Mahault Meunissier**

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# European People's Party at a Crossroads: Navigating the right-wing alliances debate

The European People's Party (EPP) is facing internal conflict concerning the strategic direction the party should adopt in case they emerge victorious in the June 2024 European Parliament elections.

Two opposed camps have emerged at the heart of the EPP. Each one is supported by different political personalities and national parties within the party, and they compete to assert their idea of the future of the party and, even more, of the European Union. The question at stake is whether they should stick to their conventional coalition with the Party of European Socialists (PES) and the liberals of Renew Europe (Renew), or if the moment has come to forge an alliance with the right-wing group of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR).

## Rapprochement between the EPP and the ECR

After the 2022 Italian general elections, Giorgia Meloni, the candidate representing the far-right party Fratelli d'Italia and leader of the ECR, became Italy's president. Her appointment, supported by Forza Italia, a member of the EPP, initiated a trend followed in several member states. Concretely, the majority of European conservative parties have been inclined to form governmental alliances with far-right parties.

This has already been the case in Sweden and Finland, where the parties belonging to the EPP have forged governmental alliances with the ones attached to the ECR. In Spain, despite the Spanish Popular Party's (PP) inability to form a national government after the general elections in July 2023 with the far-right VOX, member of the ECR, they have been able to form coalition governments in various regions and cities across the country.

Manfred Weber, from the Bavarian CSU and current president of the EPP, has been the main advocate for this shift in strategy. Weber, when questioned about approaching a party with fascist origins after meeting with Italy's President Meloni responded:

*I do acknowledge concerns regarding the history of Meloni's party, Fratelli d'Italia. However, our current discussions revolve around how, as Europeans, we can collectively tackle the significant issues facing Europe*





Weber's strategic shift became even more evident during the Spanish general elections. Weber supported the coalition strategy of the PP candidates and criticised an alleged interference of the European institutions, supposedly favouring the socialist candidate.

More precisely, Weber accused the Commission of favouring Pedro Sánchez, the incumbent president, by questioning the legality of a plan to expand irrigation in the UNESCO-protected wetlands of Doñana, approved by the conservative government of the region of Andalusia. On the other hand, Meloni had a notable role in Vox's electoral campaign, participating in their largest rallies and emphasising the importance of establishing a **“patriotic conservative alternative”**.

The objective of both politicians was that a new right-wing government in Spain was perceived as a step towards further normalisation of governmental alliances between parties belonging to the EPP and the ECR.

However, the growing closeness between the EPP and the ECR extends beyond the numerous landscapes across different member states. It is no secret that in the European Parliament, disagreement and reproof among the two parties of the traditional coalition are becoming more frequent. Moreover, within the EPP, a shift towards a position more aligned to the ECR was observable. For instance, the EPP has strongly advocated for a legislative moratorium on the adoption of new measures surrounding the Green Deal and a harsher position on immigration policies.

▀



## Opposition to a closer collaboration

On the flip side, within the EPP, dissenting voices have emerged against the potential alignment of the Christian Democrats with the ECR. One of the most prominent voices is Donald Tusk, the former President of the European Council and, most likely, future prime minister of Poland. Precisely, Donald Tusk ran as a candidate for Platforma Obywatelska, which belongs to the EPP, in a new attempt to dethrone the far-right Polish PiS-government, the main party inside the ECR. Tusk focused a significant part of his campaign on criticising the Euroscepticism of the PiS and condemning the multiple judicial reforms that have led Poland into a direct conflict with the European institutions over the country's adherence to the rule of law. Given the results of the Polish general elections of October 2023, Tusk has already declared that, instead of following the trend of governing in coalition with the far-right, he will articulate an alternative majority with left-wing parties.

An additional and significant support for distancing the EPP from the European far-right family comes from the German CDU/CSU, Weber's national party. Several voices have expressed concern regarding the EPP leader's alignment with Giorgia Meloni and the ECR. For instance, Markus Söder, the current president of the CSU and Minister-President of Bavaria, described Weber's approval of Forza Italia's agreement with Fratelli d'Italia as "a significant strategic mistake". Similarly, Alexander Dobrindt, former president of the CDU, stated that "anyone supporting the far-right nationalist parties should not be our partner".

## Ursula von der Leyen, caught between two worlds

Finally, it is essential to highlight the position that Ursula von der Leyen, current President of the Commission, holds within the division of the political party she belongs to as well, the EPP. It is noteworthy to recall that von der Leyen became head of the Commission due to the opposition of French president Emmanuel Macron, and by those member states presidents belonging to the PES, against Manfred Weber, who ran as Spitzenkandidat for the EPP in the 2019 European Parliament elections.

Although von der Leyen, as Commission President, does not directly represent the EPP's interests, it is significant that she has established strong alignments with certain European leaders outside conservative circles. Additionally, she has shown resonance with other European political groups situated more towards the left of the political spectrum. For instance, Philippe Lamberts, former head of the Greens/European Free Alliance, stated that despite initial reservations about von der Leyen's appointment, he considered her **"the best Commission president since Jacques Delors"**.

This acknowledgment stems from her handling of the joint vaccine procurement against Covid-19, structuring the Next Generation EU Funds, and notably, her dedication to the ambitious measures outlined in the Green Deal. That being said, it would not be accurate to state that von der Leyen has completely disregarded the EPP. Recently, Ursula von der Leyen has shown a closer alignment with the policies advocated by her party ▀



in the European Parliament in comparison with the rest of her term of office. On one hand, she supported the Lampedusa immigration plan, primarily backed by Weber and Meloni. On the other hand, during her 2023 State of the Union address, she suggested that a temporary halt would be adopted concerning the passing of new legislation regarding the Green Deal, which the EPP advocated for.

### **Nomination of the EPP “Spitzenkandidat”**

Considering the aforementioned, making predictions about how the internal division within the EPP will be resolved is a bold move. Although the election outcomes in Poland and Spain lessen the chances of a stronger alignment with the ECR, this prospect does not seem entirely ruled out yet, especially when taking into account the existing rift between conservatives and socialists.

However, if there is an attempt to revive the Spitzenkandidaten procedure, which lost much of its credibility in the 2019 elections, the choice of the EPP candidate would be an almost decisive factor in determining the direction in which the balance would shift.

Although Ursula von der Leyen has not publicly declared her intention to run for re-election, sources suggest that she seeks another term in office. However, Weber has refrained from publicly addressing whether von der Leyen has the backing of the EPP. Unofficially, sources mention that within Weber's circle, numerous personalities are considered suitable for the position. Particularly, there is the speculation that Roberta Metsola, current President of the

European Parliament, is the personal favourite of Weber to run as candidate.

Considering that the EPP is regarded as the party most likely to emerge the strongest out of the elections, the choice of their candidate holds the potential to signal the EU's upcoming direction. If von der Leyen remains the front runner, it is not difficult to assume that the Commission will follow a continuity-focused path, aiming to build upon the legacy she initiated five years ago by attempting to forge a stable majority with the PES, Renew and even the Greens.

Alternatively, should the EPP opt for Metsola or another unexpected candidate, it could lead to an unprecedented scenario within the European institutions, this being the inclusion of the far-right in the executive branch, prompting a redefinition of the European integration process.

Having said all of the above, the legitimacy of either perspective will rely solely on the democratic expression shown by the Union's citizens. Ultimately, the election results will play a pivotal role in establishing functioning majorities and ensuring stability within the European Parliament. Nonetheless, the European Council will, de facto, have the final say. And if someone has any doubts about this, just ask Manfred Weber.



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# Packaging waste in Europe: what path for present and future challenges?

The intricate world of European packaging regulations spans all materials and sectors, from industrial to household. As the European Union sets its sight on ambitious waste reduction targets - 70% for all packaging and 55% for plastic by 2030 - it is now time to unravel the complexities of legislative deciphering, just in time for the European elections. One question arises naturally: can MEPs streamline the processes and deliver a sustainable and greener future?



On November 30th 2022, the European Commission presented the draft Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation (PPWR) that ushered in a new set of complexities tied to the European Green Deal. At the forefront of these challenges is the notable reliance of the packaging industry on virgin materials, with packaging accounting for 40% of plastics and 50% of paper used in the EU. Without proactive intervention, the projections paint a grim picture: a potential 19% uptick in overall packaging waste and an alarming 46% surge in plastic packaging waste by the year 2030.

Over the past years, the EU has witnessed a sudden increase in packaging waste, prompting the European Commission to address this environmental challenge head-on. The overwhelming statistic that in 2020, 35% of packaging waste ended up in landfills, incinerated, or in the environment, serves as a stark reminder of the need for systemic change.

### From a directive to a regulation

In this regard, a notable shift in strategy has occurred moving from a directive to a regulation, signalling a move towards greater harmonisation across Europe. But what does this change entail?

A *directive* outlines goals for EU countries to achieve, leaving it to individual nations to tailor their laws to meet these objectives. On the contrary, a *regulation* is a binding legislative act that must be universally applied across the EU. It must be acknowledged that this shift has been widely welcomed by industry and campaigners alike, offering a more cohesive framework to tackle the multi-faceted challenge of packaging waste.

For the first time, the EU is taking a proactive stance on waste prevention. The proposal also cracks down on unnecessary packaging, with bans on specific formats, such as single-use packaging in hotels and restaurants. However, the introduction of reuse targets has sparked controversy, with industry concerns being raised about potential impacts on existing recycling infrastructure. The Commission sets ambitious targets for recycling, aiming to make all packaging recyclable by 2030 and achieving full-scale recycling by 2035. To incentivise recyclability, a grading system is introduced, with packaging rated from A to E based on how recyclable it is.

### Challenges and divisions in the European Parliament?

Despite the urgency of the packaging waste issue, progress in negotiations has been sluggish. Delara Burkhardt, a German MEP from the Socialists and Democrats group, acknowledges the complexity of the proposal and the divergence among political groups. The left, advocating for stronger environmental ambition, faces off against the cautious stance of the right.

Massimiliano Salini, the negotiator for the European People's Party, underscores the complexity of the file and the need for balanced compromises. The proposed legislation faces several contentious issues, with waste prevention, reuse targets, and the definition of recyclable packaging being hotly debated. MEP Frédérique Ries from the Renew group attempted to address some concerns with draft compromise amendments, but criticism persists. ▀

Particularly, exemptions for cardboard boxes from reuse targets have drawn attention and raised concerns about the possible impact on waste reduction efforts.

## And where does the European Green Deal fit in?

Central to the packaging legislation is its alignment with the European Green Deal, a comprehensive action plan to make the EU's economy sustainable. The proposed measures aim to not only address the packaging waste crisis but also contribute to broader environmental goals. The packaging sector's trajectory towards climate neutrality by 2050 underscores the influence of the Green Deal on legislative decisions.

## Urgent actions before the next European elections

The clock is ticking for legislators as the European Parliament aims to agree on its negotiating position by the end of the year. However, concerns are raised about the time pressure, with industry groups warning of potential issues similar to the hurried adoption of the Single-Use Plastics Directive.

Annick Carpentier of the Alliance for Beverage Cartons and the Environment expresses her regrets over the lack of time for constructive debates, emphasising the need for a future-proof legislative framework. Environmental campaigners, including Jean-Pierre Schweitzer from the European Environmental Bureau, voice concerns about potential delays and a possible dilution of key prevention and reuse measures.

The recent decision by the Environment Committee, supported by 56 votes, with 23 against and 5 abstentions, reflects the MEPs current stance on the pivotal packaging regulation. With the aim of enhancing sustainability and reducing environmental impact, MEPs proposed banning plastic carrier bags below 15 microns, unless vital for hygiene or primary packaging for loose food. Additionally, MEPs advocate for defined percentages of recycled content in plastic packaging by 2030 and 2040.

In pursuit of a circular economy, MEPs clarify distinctions between packaging for reuse or refill, setting criteria and minimum reuse cycles. Extending producer responsibility to online service providers aligns with the broader goal of creating a comprehensive approach to packaging sustainability. As these proposals align with environmental objectives, MEPs position themselves as agents of change in packaging regulations. Looking ahead to the next European elections, these positions may shape the environmental agenda, reflecting the increasing significance of sustainable practices in voters' eyes.

***The European Parliament voted to reduce the EU's packaging law: it is now clear, different paths could be taken for the packaging waste regulations with the upcoming elections***



On November 22nd 2023, almost a year after the European Commission presented the PPWR draft, the European Parliament agreed to weaken the EU's packaging law, sparking debates and causing multiple divisions among political parties on the matter.

“We cannot recycle our way out of this mess”, these are the words pronounced by the Green lawmaker Grace O’Sullivan. But let us take a step back and understand the reasons behind her outrage. Indeed, on November 22nd 2023, certain initiatives designed to reduce packaging waste were eliminated. This development not only sparked apprehension within environmental organisations but also triggered debates among political factions. On one side stand MEPs affiliated with the Green Party or the Zero Waste Party, an environmental pressure group. On the opposing side, we find the centre-right contingent, represented by the European People’s Party (EPP).

Peter Liese and Massimiliano Salini, both representing the EPP, present a coherent stance on packaging waste, diverging notably from their Green counterparts. Salini emphasises the imperative of embracing innovation and supporting sustainable packaging alternatives. He contends that such approaches should not face outright dismissal because “A ban on packaging alone will not reduce waste”. Aligning with this perspective, Liese, the EPP group’s spokesman on environmental issues, advocates for a balanced strategy. He rejects the idea that a packaging ban alone suffices in waste reduction, echoing Salini’s call for incorporating innovative and sustainable packaging solutions.

Liese emphasises the significance of considering the life cycle of packaging and stresses that, in certain contexts, single-use options may be the most environmentally sound choice. “I still find the proposal to ban small paper bags for salt, pepper and sugar problematic. We have more concerns in the European Union than worrying about such details. Paper is also a sustainable packaging material and therefore, should be treated differently to plastic. This also applies to other aspects of the proposed law”, Liese explained.

The evolution from traditional directives to a cohesive regulation signals the commitment for harmonised action. However, the challenges of divergent political positions, contentious issues, and time constraints loom large.

**At this point, there’s only one question left: which path will Europe opt for?**



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# 2

*Often overlooked  
Migration,  
Culture  
& Participation*

A background image showing two men in a library or study setting. One man is wearing a white cap and a dark jacket, and the other is wearing glasses and a dark jacket. They are shaking hands, suggesting a meeting or agreement. The background is slightly blurred, showing bookshelves.



**d:**



# Setting the tone: How Belgium prompts the asylum and migration debate in the lead- up to the European elections

**Under the Belgian presidency and leading up to the European elections, asylum and migration is going to be a prevailing topic. Yet, the tone that is being set by Brussels in this debate is a gloomy one.**

The New Pact on Migration and Asylum, a set of regulations and policies that is meant to reform migration and asylum processes in the European Union, has been in the making for a long time. Currently, in the home stretch with trilogue negotiations to be concluded by early 2024, the complete package of recommendations and regulations is expected to be adopted in April 2024. Just shortly before the European elections, the adoption of the pact will be an occasion for campaigners to spell out their positions on migration and asylum. It will also provide the Belgian presidency of the Council with an opportunity to present itself as a shaper of European migration policies. Against the backdrop of its current national policy, having Belgium prompt the debate at such a crucial point in time is impairing. The Belgian government has been promoting the narrative of an overburdening through migration, while demonstrating considerable disregard for the rule of law. Hence, gloomy tunes are to be expected when the Belgian presidency will set the tone.

For over two years, the Belgian government has been creating a strained climate and a narrative of being overflowed by individuals seeking

international protection in the country. Since autumn 2021, applicants for international protection who are considered “not vulnerable” (read: single men without serious health issues) are not prioritised in the distribution of places in Belgian reception centres. This has created a situation in which male applicants are often left without shelter, resulting in a great number of them having to stay on the streets. Applicants have to wait for weeks and months until they are being assigned a place in a centre, and can often only obtain a place if they have legal support.

The Belgian government is justifying this denial of the right to reception through a lack of accommodation places - while the national shelter act provides solutions to situations like these, stipulating for instance the allocation of applicants across communes. The Belgian state is thus directly responsible for leaving thousands of individuals without shelter and driving up homelessness literally at the doorsteps of European decision-makers. The image that everyone in the “Brussels Bubble” is confronted with every day - whether it is on their metro ride to the office or during their afterwork drink at Flagey - is the image of the tired-looking asylum ▀



seeker who has been sleeping rough for weeks. Through this image, Belgium is showcasing an alleged overburdening of national migration and asylum administrations, thereby perpetuating the narrative that too many people are seeking refuge in Europe.

However, it is not only in terms of accommodation management that Belgium is setting a gloomy example for the rest of the Union. Also in terms of respect for the rule of law is the member state dangerously deviating from defined European norms. Since the onset of the so-called “reception crisis” in autumn 2021, the Belgian federal reception agency (Fedasil) has been convicted more than 8000 times for not providing shelter to applicants for international protection. The European Court of Human Rights issued more than 1100 interim measures urging Belgium to comply with national court rulings and to provide applicants with accommodation and material assistance. However, the situation on the ground did not change significantly for most of the individuals. No adequate structural measures have been taken by Belgian policy-makers to adhere to the decisions, and fines issued by the courts have been ignored. The unwillingness to comply with judgements has become explicit once again in the summer of 2023. After the denial of shelter had been

announced as official government policy, the Belgian Council of State, the highest administrative court in the country, ruled out the decision to not respect the right to reception and suspended its implementation. In an immediate reaction to the ruling, the State Secretary in charge stated that she would go ahead with the policy regardless - thus blatantly demonstrating her disrespect for the rule of law.

The incoming Council presidency has a track-record of neglecting people seeking international protection and disregarding principles of the rule of law. When presenting the New Pact on Migration and Asylum upon its impending conclusion, Belgium will nonetheless pose as a go-getter. No matter how contrary to international law the pact might be, how unworkable its regulations and how harmful its implementation for applicants of international protections might be, measures will be justified through the image of overburdened member states - an image to which Belgium actively contributes. When speaking for the 27 member states, the Belgian Council presidency will likely perpetuate this narrative, evoking once again the tale of migration as a threat and the need for containment. With this dominating tone, the outlook for the respect of rights is as bleak as the chances for a constructive discussion about actually promoting feasible solutions in the European Union’s handling of migration and asylum.



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# Égalité des Genres : Et Après ? Un Débat Essentiel Au Coeur du Parlement

À l'approche des élections parlementaires européennes de Juin 2024, la montée de l'extrême droite dans de nombreux pays européens et le recul des droits des minorités de genre qui peut en résulter inquiètent. Face à ces enjeux, il est impératif pour l'Union Européenne de continuer à prioriser les droits de minorités de genre.

Le Parlement Européen est un acteur pionnier pour l'égalité des genres au sein des institutions européennes notamment à travers le travail de la Commission des Droits des Femmes et de l'Égalité des Genres (FEMM). Cette commission a initié la Semaine Genre et Égalité du Parlement Européen. L'édition 2023, troisième, et dernière avant les élections, a permis à différents acteurs, parlementaires et au-delà, d'échanger sur le thème : 'Égalité des Genres, Et Après ?'. Le président de FEMM, Robert Biedroń, souhaite réveiller les esprits sur le sujet:



## Représentation et Égalité des Genres

Moins de 40% des membres du parlement européen sont des femmes actuellement. La question de la participation des minorités de genre en

politique était au cœur de l'agenda de cette semaine Genre et Égalité. En plus d'avoir besoin de plus de femmes, l'UE a besoin, comme le dit Robert Biedroń, d'un “équilibre des genres”. L'accès des minorités de genre à des positions de pouvoir doit continuer à être adressé, notamment à travers la législation européenne. Même une fois élues, les femmes sont souvent reléguées à des postes avec moins de responsabilités. Elles se retrouvent à des commissions avec moins de budget ou considérées comme “moins importantes” en politique traditionnelle. Les débats sur le sujet se sont révélés stimulants, et promettent un investissement européen continu autour de cette problématique.

## Lutte contre les Violences Sexistes et Sexuelles

Un autre enjeu de taille reste la lutte contre les violences conjugales, sexistes et sexuelles. En Europe, un tiers des femmes ont rapporté avoir vécu des violences physiques et sexuelles au cours de leur vie. Cependant, les États membres de l'UE sont divisés sur la manière de contrer ce problème systémique. Les négociations en trilogue autour de cette problématique ‘piétinent’, comme le rapporte Frances Fitzgerald ▀



au Parlement Européen le 24 Octobre 2023. Là où les problématiques de cyber-violence et de mutilation génitale semblent faire consensus, le viol reste un sujet où la marche à suivre ne paraît plus si claire. L'intégration d'une définition du viol basée sur le consentement à la Charte des Droits Fondamentaux de l'UE divise. Certains pays ont déjà adopté des législations de ce type, là où d'autres refusent catégoriquement la définition, comme la France, où des manifestations féministes ont appelé le président de la République à revoir sa position en Novembre 2023.

Le Parlement Européen est résolument déterminé à adopter une directive sur la lutte contre les violences conjugales, sexistes et sexuelles à la ligne stricte afin de pouvoir adresser ces violences de manière plus efficace grâce à une convergence des mesures sur le sujet. Pourtant, des divisions sur le sujet continuent de résonner au cœur même du Parlement. Annika Bruna, parlementaire du groupe Identité et Démocratie (élue française

Rassemblement National), prend la parole lors du rapport du 24 Octobre 2023 pour soutenir ces États qui refusent certains aspects de la directive. Pour elle, le problème des violences faites aux femmes ne peut être résolu tant que l'immigration n'est pas régulée. Ainsi, la lutte contre les violences sexistes et sexuelles et conjugales ne cessent d'être remise en question au sein même des institutions européennes, montrant que le choix de nos élu.e.s peut avoir un impact décisif.

### **Droit à l'Avortement**

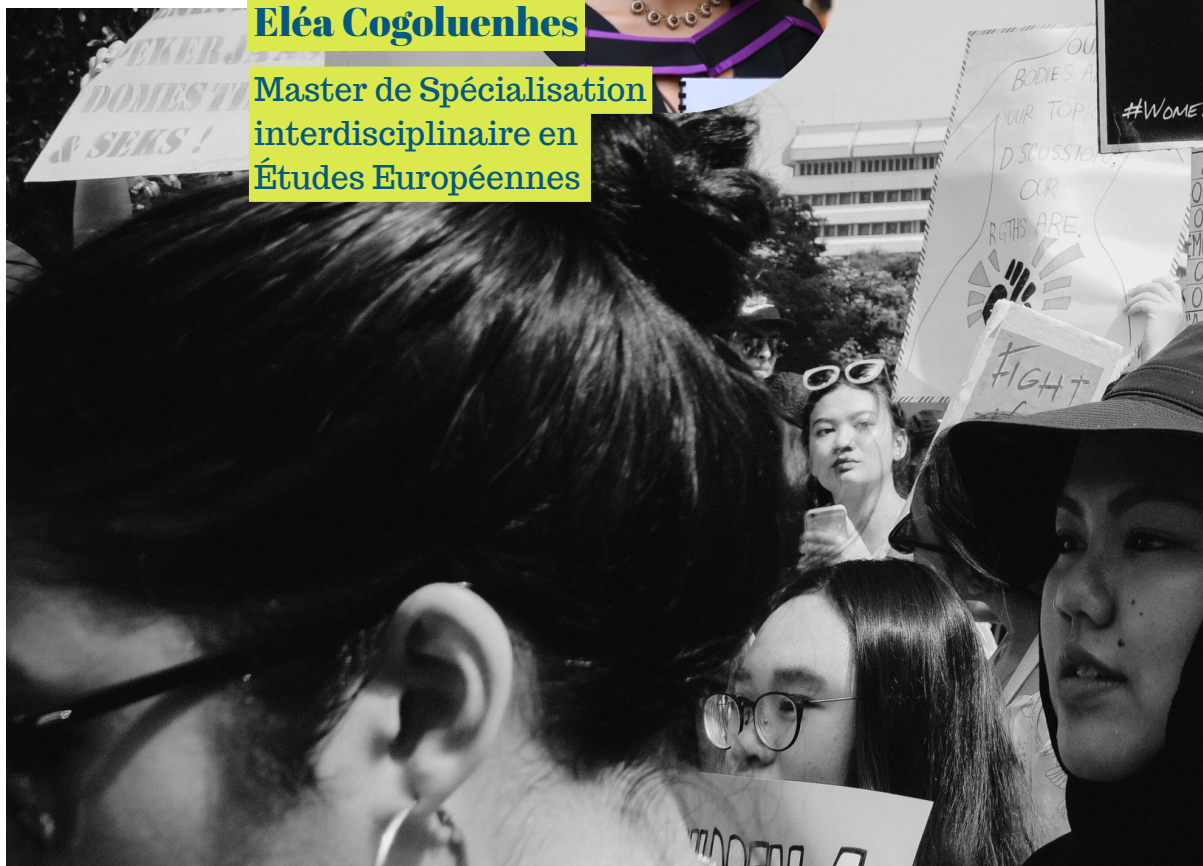
Un point noir persistant encore pour la convergence européenne sur l'égalité des genres brille par son absence lors des débats de 2023. Le droit d'accès à l'avortement, et plus largement la santé reproductive n'ont pas été abordés. Constamment remis en question au sein même de l'Europe et au-delà, c'est une problématique où un Parlement Européen uni peut faire la différence. ▀

Les députés européens ont en effet voté en Juin 2022 sur la nécessité d'intégrer le droit à l'avortement à la Charte des Droits Fondamentaux de l'UE. Cependant, la position de certains parlementaires tels que Roberta Metsola, présidente du Parlement, montre qu'un droit aussi profondément fondamental que la protection de la santé sexuelle et reproductive des minorités de genre est loin de faire consensus absolu.

L'accès à l'avortement, au marché du travail, les violences sexistes et sexuelles sont des enjeux dont l'importance ne cessent d'être remise en question au coeur même de l'Union Européenne. Il reste clé de garder à l'esprit en votant pour nos représentants en Juin prochain que leur identité a un impact sur nous, nos corps, nos droits fondamentaux.

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# The Intrinsic Link between Education, Culture, Youth Engagement, and Political Elections: A Conversation with MEP J. Albuquerque

Against the background of the European Union gearing up for the 2024 European elections, we ponder the profound connection that underlies education, culture, youth engagement, and the electoral process. During an interview with Member of the European Parliament (MEP) João Albuquerque, member of the Partido Socialista (PS) in Portugal and the Socialists & Democrats (S&D) in the European Parliament, we delve into the intricate connections among these pillars and their impact on the future of the EU. This discussion aims to outline how education, culture, youth engagement, and political elections intertwine to forge the destiny of the European Union and delineate a shared vision for its future.

## **EoE: How does education influence political participation and the future prospects of young Europeans?**

**João Albuquerque:** Well, in my experience, it is crucial to emphasise key points to boost participation on two levels. Firstly, at the family level, I have observed that engaging young people in discussions about the political system and current political events greatly contributes to their involvement. Discussing political matters on a day-to-day basis contributes significantly to keeping people engaged in the political landscape. On the other hand, what I have noticed is that young people are motivated to participate; they want to have a voice and express their opinions. However, they often feel somewhat detached from the system. They lack a clear understanding of how participating in the system can help them achieve their goals. Additionally, there seems to be a lack of knowledge, so I believe that education is key.

Addressing the lack of knowledge, not only about how the system functions but also in terms of fostering active citizenship, is crucial.

Education can play a pivotal role not just in enhancing knowledge about the functioning of the system, but also in promoting active citizenship. It's essential to convey the idea that being a citizen is not merely about being passive—such as being a taxpayer, consumer, or voter—but also about being active and playing a role in the change they want to achieve.

## **EoE: On a practical level, how can education boost citizen involvement? For example, proposing more curricular activities - what can be done before university when students start thinking about politics?**

**JA:** My straightforward answer is yes; Additionally, there seems to be a lack of knowledge, so I believe that education is key. ▀

Fundamentally, it should be a course where individuals can discuss and reflect on their surroundings - locally, nationally, at the European level, and as citizens of the world.

Additionally, two other crucial aspects come to mind. Firstly, the rules of schools should involve students in decision-making mechanisms. This is vital. Just to give you an example, Portugal proposed establishing, for the first time, a student council. This council would have seats and play an advisory role in all matters related to education. Secondly, we must promote a mindset in schools that fosters the establishment of forums and spaces for debating communal issues. This involves allowing people to express their expectations for the society and communities to which they belong.

Another important, though not so straightforward issue is the promotion of critical thinking and problem-solving in the educational system. Currently, many systems are goal-oriented, focusing on achieving specific goals through exam performance. This concentration on final exams often tests one's ability to pass rather than fostering the idea of a citizen who critically evaluates, perceives, and acquires knowledge. It is crucial to develop students' capacity for critical thinking and problem-solving to ensure they can effectively tackle challenges in various situations. This skill is also immensely valuable for democratic participation.

**EoE: In what ways does culture promote mutual understanding among nations and contribute to the formation of a shared European identity?**

**JA:** That is a very interesting question because I believe it is one of the main principles on which the European Union is founded. Our motto is United in Diversity, and this encapsulates precisely what we are - a union of 27 member states, each with its own unique characteristics. Inside these states, there are different nationalities, regional identities, and cultural identities in various aspects such as language, traditions, music, and literature. These diverse identities contribute to the national identity of a country. Take Spain, for example, or Italy, Romania, and France; they have specific cities with different languages within the same country. However, these differences do not diminish the overall identity of being French, Spanish, or Italian. Instead, they add layers to our identities, showing that we are capable of embracing multiple layers to form a cohesive whole.

I believe that culture is fundamental, and our capacity to share true cultural production, embracing different identities and feelings, can have a transformative effect. Culture often brings people together and enhances mutual understanding rather than creating divisions. To illustrate, let me provide a non-European example that can apply to the European case as well. One of my favourite projects is the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, founded by Baron Boim and Edward Said. This orchestra brings together people from both Israel and Palestine, including individuals of different religions or beliefs. Over the years, this project has successfully united people through the power of music and interpretation. It exemplifies the transformative capacity of creating a sense of unity through cultural production. ▀

**EoE: While reflecting on the upcoming European elections, should we consider anything specific, such as enhancing the cultural agenda for Europe, as an asset?**

**JA:** I believe that the cultural sector is often overlooked in terms of public policy. Sometimes, it is considered a minor aspect when discussing political priorities. In my opinion, it should be the other way around; education and culture should be at the centre - truly at the centre - of every policymaking process. They are the transformative forces behind many aspects that can either create union or division, depending on how they are utilised.

**EoE: In the policymaking process, another element that should be focused on is that of young people. What is the main role of youth engagement in trying to strengthen democracy and social cohesion?**

**JA:** Well, I work extensively with young people, and my focus is on issues specifically related to them. It would be a significant oversight if we do not take into consideration the major challenges affecting young people today. These challenges extend beyond mental health concerns, such as climate anxiety and general mental health issues tied to performance and the pressure to achieve certain objectives. This creates considerable anxiety among young people.

On the other hand, there are those who feel completely disengaged due to factors like social exclusion and extreme socioeconomic conditions. Many are solely focused on making ends meet each month, struggling to emancipate themselves as their families teeter on the edge of poverty and exclusion.

When discussing how to integrate the specific aspirations, expectations, and frustrations of young people into public policies, we need to be very careful. One initiative I strongly support is the Youth Test, advocated by the European Forum. This tool allows us to measure the impact that public policies have on the future. It's essential to consider how decisions made now, whether related to the environment, social security, pensions, economic systems, education, etc., will affect future generations. Thus, it's crucial to weigh the present impact and the impact on future generations when drafting public policies.

**EoE: How can political elections effectively translate the intersection of education, cultural engagement, and politics into action, serving as a platform to address societal well-being by reflecting and addressing the aspirations, concerns, and frustrations of the society?**

**JA:** For me, it is evident, but what may not be as clear is how we communicate this on a massive scale so that young people can understand. The reason it is obvious to me is that the majority of the issues that young people perceive as threatening to their present and future - such as housing, climate change, energy transition, and the future of work - are being discussed and addressed at the European level. These issues cannot be adequately solved on the national level alone; while national policies may complement, they must be tackled at the European level.

They are already being addressed, and it's crucial to ensure that people understand the critical nature of these issues. Many of them, like artificial intelligence for example, cannot be effectively regulated by a single state. ▀



Therefore, it's important to convey the significance of the European Union in deciding such matters. Simultaneously, we need to explain to people that their vote in elections matters, and that it makes a difference which individuals they send to Brussels and Strasbourg as their representatives.

An illustrative example is a recent controversial vote on the EU Nature Restoration Law. Despite being based on scientific evidence, the far right and the centre managed to polarise the issue for political reasons. This emphasises the importance of choosing representatives carefully, as demonstrated by issues like the regulation of pesticides. The influence of elected representatives can significantly impact the outcomes of crucial regulations. In the upcoming campaign, it will be vital to focus on clear positions on key issues and convey to young people that their vote matters, urging them to choose representatives carefully, particularly in times where certain political opinions dominate the narrative, polarise discourse, and influence policy decisions.

**EoE: When contemplating potential reforms, how should we emphasise and clarify what I see as a critical starting point - the issue of multiculturalism?**

**I believe this will prove to be pivotal in either strengthening or worsening the sense of belonging or disbelonging to Europe. Multiculturalism, sometimes expressed through speaking different languages, plays a significant role. What is your opinion on the role of multiculturalism and, particularly, multilingualism for Europe in 2024?**

**JA:** I believe we would be greatly mistaken in shaping public opinion

without considering these premises. It's one of the most contradictory debates we are currently facing. Across all parts of Europe, we hear from companies, entrepreneurs, public officials, and experts in demographics and geography that we need more people to come to Europe. The call is for individuals to work, study, innovate, create, and contribute to improving our society and global understanding.

However, on the flip side, we witness more governments and populist parties creating a narrative that scapegoats migrants and external individuals for the social problems that, in my opinion, are often rooted in an unfair and unequal socioeconomic system. We must recognise that Europe is no longer the centre of the world in terms of being the largest economic or military superpower. Even on the diplomatic level, we are not the most influential player on the international stage. Instead, we have other assets - a strong social capacity, unparalleled cultural diversity, and security that permeates various aspects of our lives.

If we foster antagonism between Europeans and non-Europeans, perpetuating strategies that amplify hostility towards those outside the European Union, we risk diminishing our relevance in the world. It is crucial that we attract people from outside, create conditions for integration, and embrace diversity. People coming here to work, start families, and contribute have done so for decades and centuries in many European countries. We must not fail to honour our own history, traditions, and become a continent that is truly multicultural. This adds value to our identity and goes beyond languages, literature, music, and gastronomy. ▀

Multiculturalism is intertwined with globalisation, contributing to the creation of new identities. It is fundamental that we do not betray our history, traditions, and identity by fortifying Europe and preventing multiculturalism from being our strongest asset.



What emerges from this comprehensive interview with MEP J. Albuquerque is a clear roadmap that provides a guide to understanding the intricate interplay of education, culture, youth engagement, and political elections within the European Union. Emphasising the crucial role of education in shaping an informed political landscape and advocating for active youth involvement as a catalyst for democracy, the interview displays the interconnectedness between electoral outcomes and cultural and educational policies. Ultimately, this interview serves as a fundamental resource for those seeking to promote a more informed, cohesive, and participatory European society, shedding light on the dynamic relationships among education, culture, youth engagement, and political elections.

***Antonio Guterres used to say that education was his passion. It is also mine, and I believe it is the primary vehicle we have to shape the future. Europe needs to be a continent that embraces the diversity of identities, leveraging these individualities to create something greater than the sum of its parts. Europe is much more than just the aggregate of its individualities.***

**- João Albuquerque**



**Luca Maicon Vinicius Bellavia**

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# PUTIN'S EUROPE

**There is no place in Europe in which Putin would not be interested.**

In recent decades, Europeans have been living in relative peace, underestimating the rising tensions and challenges posed by their neighbour, Russia. This underestimation stems from a belief in the strength and permanence of the European project, a belief that has been rudely shattered in recent times, particularly since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

**On 24 February 2022, the Europeans awoke from their peaceful slumber.** The tranquillity of the last few years turned out to be a delusion, and Europeans began to fear seriously for the future of their beautiful home. With the war it became clear that Europe, the European Union and its member states were not free from Putin. From his influence, his money, his ideology, his rhetoric. A wave of self-audits overflowed from east to west.

Areas of the economy, politics, the media world, and social organisations that acted in the interests of, and often on behalf of, the Kremlin were pinpointed. The high price Europe paid for years of looking the other way and comfort was revealed. The price of subordination and dependence. The connections of parties and their leaders, companies and their boards of directors, news portals and their editors to Russian principals became increasingly clear. Exposing these connections made it possible to understand many of the undertakings of recent years, their motivations and their true beneficiaries. Suddenly, the dirt and the dangers could be seen in a new light. Without this alarm bell, there would have been no question of taking defensive action. And without defensive action there will be no security.

The **European Liberal Forum**, supported by the **Project: Poland Foundation**, has taken on the crucial task of dissecting and explaining the extent of Russia's influence across Europe. The initiative brings together twenty experts and editors from across the continent to articulate how Russian dictator Vladimir Putin's actions and ideologies are affecting the lives of everyday Europeans. This exploration is not just a narrative of external geopolitical manoeuvres; it delves into the internal dynamics of European countries, highlighting how Putin's reach has infiltrated various sectors, including the economy, politics, media, and social organizations.

The study describes universal phenomena and trends. Even when the starting point for describing a problem is a single country or a group of countries, it does not at all mean that this problem is limited to this particular geographical area. On the contrary, it should be assumed that it is or will be present in one form or another in other countries as well. The question is: when and with what intensity? Because there are no places in Europe in which Putin would not be interested. **Destabilising or subjugating every patch, even small or remote from Moscow, brings the dictator closer to his goal: reconstructing the empire, building Putin's Europe.**

**SCAN TO READ THE NEW STUDY.**



# Mind the gap: le dilemme de la participation des jeunes dans les prochaines élections européennes

Diverses études révèlent systématiquement un taux de participation électorale alarmant chez les jeunes, à différents niveaux et dans différentes régions et pays. L'écart entre les jeunes et les électeurs plus âgés s'est considérablement creusé dans le monde démocratique, ce qui met en évidence le problème d'un gap générationnel dans les futures politiques menées en Europe.

*Oublie l'avenir c'était avant  
Oublie l'avenir d'avant  
C'est pas sur qu'on soit d'dans  
Apprends-moi l'pardon la patience  
Faut qu'on soit meilleur qu'nos parents  
Faut qu'on apprenne à désapprendre*

**Orelsan, extrait de "Civilisation"**

Les études sur les élections européennes révèlent un paysage choquant d'abstention électorale dans les États membres de l'UE. En particulier parmi les plus jeunes cohortes d'électeurs, où l'abstention aux élections européennes est singulièrement élevée (plus de 70 %). La participation politique est le meilleur mécanisme d'articulation des intérêts. Elle influe sur la satisfaction de la vie et constitue une forme d'équilibre des pouvoirs pour les décideurs. L'absence des jeunes dans la politique institutionnelle affecte également leur représentation, car une faible participation des jeunes à la politique signifie qu'ils ont relativement peu à attendre du gouvernement, les politiciens n'étant guère incités à se concentrer sur les politiques qui profitent aux jeunes. L'âge moyen des membres du Parlement européen est de 49,5 ans. Alors que 20 % de la population européenne est composée de jeunes, seuls 6 % des membres du

Parlement européen ont moins de 35 ans. Les jeunes sont en effet sous-représentés en nombre. L'âge apparaît comme l'un des facteurs prédictifs les plus forts de la participation électorale et, avec le revenu et l'éducation, il constitue l'une des explications les plus solides des différences de participation électorale.

## Les jeunes comme lame de fond des élections?

**2019.** L'activiste Greta Thunberg invente l'expression "Fridays for Future" qui, cinq ans plus tard, est devenue un mouvement mondial de jeunes. En mars dernier, une grève mondiale a rassemblé plus d'un million de personnes avec 2 200 manifestations dans 125 pays. Dans la lutte contre le réchauffement climatique, ce n'est pas la partie "réchauffement climatique" qui pose problème aux dirigeants en Europe, qui ▸



s'inquiètent de la banquise qui fond, ou de l'Amazonie qui brûle; c'est l'utilisation du mot "lutte" que les jeunes qui à mené au débat.

**Pologne.** Élections nationales 2023. Près de 69% des jeunes de moins de 30 ans se sont rendus aux urnes, beaucoup d'entre eux souhaitant se débarrasser du status quo.

De nombreux primo-votants ne se souvenaient même pas d'une Pologne gouvernée par l'opposition. Le taux de participation à cette élection a été de 74,3%, la mobilisation des jeunes et des femmes a été déterminante.

De nombreuses campagnes sur les médias sociaux et de nombreux projets ont encouragé les jeunes électeurs à voter, mais même le fait que Jarosław Kaczyński (fondateur du Parti Loi and Justice et ex premier ministre polonais) ait poussé beaucoup de ressources financières surtout au bénéfice des retraités, a aussi convaincu de nombreux jeunes électeurs à se rendre dans les bureaux de vote.

En outre, un revirement de la position hostile du PiS (Parti Loi et Justice) à l'égard des droits des minorités semble avoir été dans l'esprit de nombreux jeunes électeurs. Les énormes manifestations de rue de 2020 contre l'interdiction quasi-totale de l'avortement ont marqué une étape décisive dans la mobilisation politique des jeunes et ont été un moment d'éveil politique pour de nombreux jeunes.

### **La rupture avec l'extrême droite: le changement par la sécurité**

Le sentiment du "déclinisme", du "c'était mieux avant" peut mener à un vote de l'extrême droite. Nombreux jeunes à regarder avec mélancolie et envie en direction d'une époque qu'il n'ont

paradoxalement pas connue: celle de leurs parents, voire de leurs grand parents. C'est ce sentiment d'injustice, de ne pas avoir pu profiter d'une Europe prospère, (largement mythifiée) qui mène ainsi une partie des jeunes au vote d'extrême droite.

**Allemagne.** Élections régionales 2023. En Thuringe, avec 24 % des jeunes qui ont voté en faveur du parti d'extrême droite, l'AfD est devenu la force la plus puissante parmi les moins de 30 ans. De même, en Saxe, 22 % des électeurs de moins de 30 ans ont préféré l'AfD aux Verts, qui arrivent en deuxième position dans cette tranche d'âge.

La dégradation des conditions matérielles d'existence des jeunes, couplée à un désintérêt médiatique et politique, peut en partie expliquer le comportement électoral de cette jeunesse souvent peu privilégiée. La majorité des jeunes happés par la dimension populiste, les discours victimaires des "Français (ou Italiens ou Allemands, Néerlandais) qui n'ont plus rien" au détriment des "étrangers à qui l'on donne tout".

Il ne faut pas tomber dans l'erreur d'expliquer tout ça comme une montée de la xénophobie. La vie de jeunes est devenue plus précaire, entre crises sur la santé et le logement.

**Pays Bas.** Élections nationales 2023. "Bestaanszekerheid" était un des sujets les plus importants pour les jeunes qui ont voté Wilders. Le mot néerlandais signifie notamment la condition dans laquelle le salaire est suffisant, une maison satisfaisante, accès adéquat à l'instruction et à la santé.

Étudier dans une ville comme Amsterdam est devenu toujours plus difficile car beaucoup de jeunes n'ont pas les moyens de se payer une chambre dans la capitale. ▀

Lors de sa campagne électo-rale, Wilders a promis de donner un logement aux jeunes néerlandais. Aux Pays-Bas, le PVV est devenu le premier parti chez les 18-34 ans, avec 17% des voix contre 7% auparavant. L'insécurité économique est le facteur le plus important. Les jeunes électeurs n'ont pas spécialement évolué vers la droite en ce qui concerne l'immigration, l'avortement et les droits des minorités. Les partis d'extrême droite les ont convaincus qu'ils offraient une alternative économique crédible.

### L'abstention: premier parti des jeunes

**Les jeunes ne votent plus?** Quelle jeunesse désengagée! C'est le triomphe de l'individualisme au sein des nouvelles générations! En effet, les jeunes votent de moins en moins, c'est indiscutable. Les jeunes s'avèrent être absents de manière alarmante des élections nationales, avec une moyenne de près de 60 % des électeurs de 16/18 à 24 ans qui choisissent de ne pas voter. L'absence généralisée des jeunes dans la politique institutionnelle de l'UE est indéniable.

On perçoit que le système démocratique doit se renouveler. Différentes formes d'engagement citoyen - les pétitions, les boycott, les manifestations, les occupations ou même l'expression sur les réseaux sociaux - peuvent donner aux citoyens l'impression d'être plus actifs politiquement qu'en se rendant aux urnes. C'est la "do it yourself politics".

La non-participation s'explique par des sentiments de méfiance, désintérêt, désinformation ou tout simplement désillusion, l'impression de ne pas être écoutés, ne pas avoir de pouvoir.

**Italie.** Élections nationales 2018. Le Mouvement 5 étoiles (M5S) est le parti le plus voté, et surtout le plus choisi par les jeunes. Dans la tranche d'âge 18-30

ans, 44% ont voté pour le M5S. Il n'y a pas de message plus clair que celui-ci: les jeunes Italiens accordent leur confiance à ce nouveau parti de manière significative. Le point principal du programme électoral du M5S était le "revenu de citoyenneté", une mesure destinée à soutenir les citoyens en difficulté économique. De nombreuses données émergent de manière fragmentée: l'aide a surtout bénéficié aux plus de 35 ans; souvent, et surtout dans les régions du sud du pays, elle semble avoir aidé les familles à garder les jeunes à la maison, au lieu de les aider à quitter le foyer; un demi-million de personnes ont trouvé un emploi, mais en moyenne le contrat qu'elles ont trouvé était de trois mois. Le gouvernement, ou plutôt le Parlement des jeunes, n'intervient pas sur les grandes questions qui concernent les jeunes. De plus, un coup d'œil à la pyramide des âges montre que les jeunes ne font vraiment pas le poids face à leurs aînés. Les jeunes en Europe se trouvent politiquement écrasés par la pyramide démographique.

Le changement démographique en cours aggrave le fossé entre la participation des jeunes et leur représentation dans le processus d'élaboration des politiques européennes, ce qui risque d'entraîner des désavantages systématiques pour les futures générations d'Européens.

Voilà le serpent qui se mord frénétiquement la queue: les jeunes votent moins, ce qui explique que les politiques s'intéressent moins à eux et donc défendent moins leurs idées, ce qui explique qu'ils votent encore moins.

L'insécurité résultant de l'instabilité des relations de travail, ou du système éducatif, mais aussi des bas salaires, ou encore des menaces de plus en plus réelles liées au changement climatique,



peut ainsi très souvent conduire à un phénomène beaucoup plus dangereux, celui de l'inaction ; une inaction qui, à son tour, génère découragement, exclusion et isolement. Tout cela renvoie avant tout à une question plus générale, celle de la durabilité (sous ses trois nuances, économique, environnementale et sociale) de nos politiques publiques; un développement qui permette aux générations actuelles de satisfaire leurs besoins sans compromettre la possibilité pour les générations futures de satisfaire les leurs. La précarité, en tant que telle, est l'ennemie de la durabilité, car elle empêche toute planification à long terme de l'avenir. C'est la durabilité générationnelle des réformes que la classe politique décidera de mettre en œuvre qui va être un élément indispensable pour l'avenir de l'Europe.



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# Citoyenneté de demain, la jeunesse aux urnes : l'Europe face à la question cruciale du vote à 16 ans

**À seize ans, on peut conduire, travailler, payer ses impôts,... Et si on pouvait aussi voter ?**

Dans de nombreux États-membres de l'Union Européenne, le débat sur le droit de vote à partir de seize ans resurgit systématiquement à l'approche des élections. Le dernier pays en date à avoir baissé l'âge du droit de vote est la Belgique en mai 2023.

Ce changement du droit électoral belge s'est par ailleurs heurté à une particularité de la Loi qu'est l'obligation de vote en vigueur dans le pays. Dès lors, une question s'est posée : Est-ce que les jeunes électeurs de moins de 18 ans devront eux-aussi "passer dans l'isoloir" comme doivent le faire tous les citoyens belges de plus de dix-huit ans ?

Avant que le Plat Pays ne saute le pas, l'Allemagne, la Grèce, Malte, et l'Autriche (précurseur en la matière...) avaient déjà voté des législations similaires. L'entrée de cette nouvelle frange électorale dans les sondages a apporté de nouveaux enjeux propres à chacun de ces pays, par exemple, en Allemagne, c'est la question de la digitalisation qui fait le plus écho aux 16-17 ans, à Malte, c'est la question de la qualité de la vie à laquelle les jeunes s'intéressent, et enfin, en Belgique, c'est surtout la nature même du système fédéral que les jeunes peinent à saisir.

Alors que pour l'Union européenne, ce sont les Gouvernements nationaux qui sont libres d'établir l'âge électoral minimum, le Parlement européen, en vue des élections européennes de 2024, a mis sur la table une résolution qui vise non seulement à l'harmonisation de l'âge minimum à travers tous les États-membres, mais aussi recommandé d'abaisser l'âge du droit de vote à seize ans.

La position du Parlement se justifie notamment pour des raisons démographiques (population vieillissante) et démocratiques (augmenter la participation). Dès lors, quelle voie prendront les décideurs européens ?

## **Les Jeunes, trop immatures pour entrer dans l'isoloir...**

Les détracteurs de cette nouveauté ont tendance à mettre en avant l'argument d'une immaturité présente chez les jeunes citoyens et futurs électeurs pour voter de manière éclairée et consciente des enjeux.

Cet argument se base sur l'idée que l'expérience de vie serait un facteur fondamental dans la création d'une opinion politique valable, et que les jeunes n'ayant pas suffisamment vécu voteraient donc en se basant principalement sur les a priori qu'ils pourraient avoir de la vie "adulte". ▀



De plus, et ce toujours selon une idée non-fondée, ils seraient trop occupés “à jouer à des jeux vidéos, à passer du temps sur leur téléphone portable ou à sortir avec leurs amis” pour s’intéresser à la politique.

De ce fait, les jeunes de moins de 18 ans n’y connaîtraient rien à la politique et ne pourraient avoir de conscience politique ou sociale. Pire encore, les jeunes seraient particulièrement victimes de manipulation sur les réseaux sociaux, en particulier pendant les campagnes électorales, lorsque les discours démagogues et simplificateurs sont particulièrement présents sur Internet, et c’est ainsi qu’ils sauteraient plus facilement à pieds joints dans ces rhétoriques “alléchantes” tout bonnement parce qu’ils n’auraient pas ladite maturité émotionnelle suffisante pour entrevoir les conséquences de leur choix électoral impulsif qui rentrerait en opposition avec le caractère presque solennel du vote.

Enfin, ceux qui placent la famille au cœur de leurs valeurs, considèrent que les seize ou dix-sept ans, qui n’ont pas eu à gérer l’éducation d’enfants et à faire face à ces responsabilités familiales, iraient voter sans conscience sur des enjeux sociaux réels et de leurs conséquences.

### **Les Jeunes, désireux de s’engager et de participer...**

Cependant, contrairement à ce que semblent penser les partisans des arguments contre le droit de vote des jeunes citoyens à partir de 16 ans, les jeunes semblent avoir une certaine conscience politique. Ces dernières années, les mouvements de jeunes avec des revendications se sont multipliés à travers l’Europe.

L’exemple du “European Youth Forum” qui réunit plus de 100 organisations à travers toute l’Union Européenne et représente plus d’un million de jeunes est révélateur d’une conscience politique chez les jeunes. Ce forum lutte pour les droits des jeunes en matière de logement, d’éducation, de travail ou de santé, et il se positionne en faveur d’un dialogue entre la politique et les jeunes. Selon eux, abaisser le droit de vote à seize ans renforcerait nos démocraties en réduisant le fossé entre les élus et les plus jeunes générations. À présent, ils sont actifs dans la société, bien souvent ils travaillent, conduisent et payent leurs impôts, déjà. En somme, nombreux sont ceux qui à 16 ans s’engagent et participent à la société, mais pourtant ils n’ont pas le droit de pratiquer l’un des actes les plus fondamentaux de la citoyenneté : voter.

Les marches pour le climat sont aussi un autre exemple particulièrement criant de l’engagement des jeunes. Par exemple, en Belgique en 2019, “Youth for Climate” lance le mouvement en s’inspirant de la Suédoise Greta Thunberg. Et à travers plus de 185 pays, ce sont plus de quatre millions de jeunes qui se sont mobilisés, pendant des semaines pour demander à leurs élus de remettre au premier plan de leurs politiques la lutte contre le réchauffement climatique. Les statistiques estiment que plus d’un tiers des manifestants avaient moins de 19 ans.

Ces jeunes manifestants ont démontré, à travers leurs actions, vouloir s’engager dans la vie politique notamment pour des enjeux sociaux et environnementaux prépondérants qui auront des conséquences dans leur avenir. Abaisser l’âge légal du vote serait donc une reconnaissance de cette conscience ▀

politique et de leur capacité à contribuer de manière significative à la vie démocratique.

En outre, la société est confrontée à des défis complexes et se trouve à un moment décisif où les décisions prises par les gouvernements auront un impact direct et durable sur les jeunes générations, qu'il s'agisse d'éducation, d'emploi ou encore de protection de l'environnement. Leur voix devrait donc être entendue dans le processus décisionnel, car les jeunes seront les premiers à ressentir les conséquences de ces choix dans le futur.

Enfin, l'argument de l'ignorance des jeunes en matière de politique pourrait être très concrètement démenti par leur participation dans le processus électoral et en abaissant l'âge de vote, les jeunes auraient l'opportunité d'acquérir une compréhension pratique du système politique et développer une identité citoyenne plus tôt. Le développement de cette dernière aurait un impact tout au long de la vie de ces jeunes citoyens et favoriserait une participation continue et informée à la vie sociale et politique.

En conclusion, la question de l'abaissement de l'âge du droit de vote à seize ans suscite un débat dont les enjeux sont complexes, mettant en lumière des arguments variés et parfois dichotomiques qui révèlent des visions contradictoires de la jeunesse. Face à ces interrogations importantes pour l'avenir de nos démocraties, il en revient aux décideurs européens de faire un choix éclairé, décisif en termes de reconnaissance des jeunes et de leur implication dans la Société.

Les arguments "contre" mettent en avant une immaturité des jeunes ▀





électeurs, la susceptibilité à la manipulation politique à travers les réseaux sociaux, et l'absence d'expérience de vie, mais ils sont contredits et ils le sont par une réalité où les jeunes démontrent une conscience politique et une vitalité grandissante. Les mouvements de jeunes, tels que le “European Youth Forum” et les “Marches pour le Climat”, témoignent de leur engagement et de leur désir de contribuer activement à la société.

D'un autre côté, abaisser l'âge du vote offre une opportunité d'intégrer les jeunes plus tôt dans le processus démocratique, renforçant ainsi la légitimité de la gouvernance. Leur participation active dans des mouvements sociaux et leur compréhension des enjeux contemporains indiquent une fraîche capacité à contribuer de manière réfléchie aux décisions politiques.

Au-delà des arguments théoriques, la réalité des défis auxquels la société est confrontée exige une implication des jeunes dans la prise de décision étant donnée des conséquences futures des choix d'aujourd'hui. En fin de compte, le choix des décideurs européens réside dans la reconnaissance de la maturité politique des jeunes et dans la volonté de favoriser une démocratie inclusive, où chaque voix, indépendamment de l'âge, contribue à façonner l'avenir. Le débat actuel représente une opportunité de transcender les préjugés sur la jeunesse et de créer une société où la participation citoyenne soit encouragée dès le plus jeune âge.

**Alors, quelle voie choisira l'Europe pour façonner son avenir démocratique ?**

**Marie El Bouziani**

MA2 en Études Européennes

# Vers une UE plus proche de ses citoyens : le rôle incontournable des villes et régions

Les élus locaux et régionaux sont les principaux porte-paroles, et les gardiens de nos diversités. Ils permettent de prendre le pouls de la population et de comprendre leurs doléances.

La démocratie repose essentiellement sur la confiance qu'ont les citoyens envers leurs représentants, principalement exprimée par leur vote. Grâce à la proximité qu'ils entretiennent avec leurs citoyens, les dirigeants politiques régionaux contribuent à renforcer la confiance des citoyens envers cette démocratie européenne. Cette proximité est pour beaucoup un premier pas vers un système politique légitime.

## La démocratie européenne à travers le prisme régional

Le principe de subsidiarité, consacré à l'article 5 du traité sur l'Union européenne, affirme que les niveaux régional, national et européen doivent être imbriqués afin d'appliquer correctement les principes de l'Union européenne. Ce principe est incarné par les parlements régionaux et est fondamental pour rapprocher l'Union européenne de ses citoyens, étant donné qu'il permet aux décisions d'être prises au niveau le plus proche d'eux.

Les acteurs régionaux sont bien plus que de simples exécutants. Ils ont une position privilégiée leur permettant de connaître les problèmes spécifiques de leur population.

Les difficultés rencontrées par un grand nombre de citoyens lors des récentes crises a parfois suscité un sentiment de révolte croissant de leur part. A cet égard, la consultation des régions permet de répondre concrètement aux besoins des populations, assurant ainsi une mise en œuvre efficace des politiques de l'UE auprès des citoyens.

Une enquête sollicitée par le Comité des Régions, dans laquelle les élus locaux ont été interrogés, a révélé que 90 % de ces derniers estiment qu'une « meilleure information sur les systèmes démocratiques aux niveaux européen, national et infranational » permettrait d'améliorer le système démocratique européen. Par ailleurs, 86 % des enquêtés conviennent que « le renforcement de la participation des niveaux de gouvernement locaux au processus décisionnel de l'UE » améliorerait la démocratie dans l'UE.

Dans la même lignée, le Comité des régions estime également que l'implication des dirigeants locaux et régionaux dans les politiques européennes permettrait de répondre aux demandes des citoyens, qui exigent « plus de transparence, d'inclusion et de participation ».

## Les élus régionaux en première ligne de la gestion des crises

De fait, les prochaines élections se dérouleront à nouveau dans un contexte de crises et de défis. Les crises de l'actuelle législature ont eu des conséquences ▮



qui ont parfois remis en question la confiance des citoyens envers les institutions politiques, et ont polarisé le paysage politique.

Les élus régionaux sont régulièrement con-frontés aux conséquences des crises qu'il s'agisse, par exemple, de catastrophes climatiques, de crise énergétique ou encore sanitaire. Bien que les problèmes sociétaux appellent à des réponses européennes voire mondiales, les crises sont avant tout ressenties par les populations au niveau local et régional. C'est également au niveau régional que des solutions et mesures concrètes sont mises en œuvre. Cette réalité a été résumée par Stefano Bonaccini, président de la région d'Emilie Romagne : « quand les États parlent, les collectivités locales agissent ».

La politique de cohésion permet aux régions de répondre et de s'adapter rapidement à ces crises. Cet instrument a par exemple soutenu les régions dans leur accueil des réfugiés ukrainiens, ou dans l'aide aux ménages et PME vulnérables dans le cadre de la crise énergétique.

Par ailleurs, les crises de diverses natures auxquelles l'UE a dû faire face ces dernières années ont abouti à de fortes demandes de la part des citoyens, qui réclament des politiques plus efficaces, ayant des résultats concrets sur leur vie quotidienne. En outre, les citoyens abordent généralement les problématiques et politiques européennes à travers le prisme de leur réalité régionale ou locale. Il est donc important pour l'UE d'agir dans une optique de gouvernance à plusieurs niveaux. Des solutions appropriées et territorialisées seront efficaces sur le terrain, et seront donc perçues comme pertinentes aux yeux des

citoyens. A contrario, des politiques perçues comme inopérantes encourent le risque d'accroître leur sentiment de réticence vis-à-vis des politiques européennes. Prendre en considération les intérêts régionaux permettrait ainsi aux citoyens de voir que les problèmes auxquels ils sont confrontés sont pris en compte à l'échelle européenne.

### **La confiance citoyenne : Clé de voûte de notre système démocratique**

Les attentes potentiellement insatisfaites des citoyens engendrent une perte de confiance dans nos systèmes politiques. Depuis quelques années, le débat public s'est intensifié, tandis que les liens entre les citoyens et leurs institutions, ainsi que la confiance dans l'action publique se détériorent. Les systèmes démocratiques sont constamment remis en question quant à leur capacité à répondre efficacement aux préoccupations de la population.

Pourtant, un climat de confiance est fondamental. Elle incite les citoyens à être plus enclins à adopter une position active, à coopérer, à respecter les lois, à soutenir des initiatives et à s'engager politiquement. La démocratie représentative repose sur la confiance mutuelle entre le peuple et leurs représentants politiques.

Cette confiance est un pilier essentiel de notre système démocratique, et il y a lieu de constater qu'elle se penche davantage en faveur des autorités locales, que des autorités nationales. Ce constat n'est guère surprenant ; es autorités locales exercent une influence directe sur leurs problèmes concrets, auxquelles elles y apportent des solutions dont les effets sont directement percevables. ▀

De surcroît, les parlements régionaux agissent comme interface entre les citoyens et les institutions de l'Union européenne. La coopération entre le Parlement européen et les représentants régionaux a d'ailleurs le potentiel de maximiser l'engagement public, ce qui est dans l'intérêt commun des deux institutions. Accroître la visibilité des assemblées régionales en tant qu'acteurs essentiels de la démocratie européenne permettrait de sensibiliser les citoyens aux élections européennes et dès lors de promouvoir leur participation active.

Si l'UE veut regagner la confiance des citoyens avant les élections européennes, elle doit donc renforcer ses liens avec les villes et les régions. Sur le terrain, les citoyens réclament du changement, mais il est difficile pour les citoyens de percevoir les effets des politiques menées par l'UE pour résoudre les problèmes locaux, ce qui peut engendrer un important écart entre les attentes des citoyens et la capacité des institutions à y répondre. Par exemple, seul un tiers des Européens sont conscients de l'impact de la politique de cohésion sur leur vie quotidienne.

Les élus locaux et régionaux sont les mieux placés pour expliquer les avantages de l'intégration européenne dans la vie des citoyens.

En informant les citoyens sur les enjeux européens, et en encourageant la participation citoyenne, les villes et régions permettent de renforcer la démocratie participative et le sentiment d'appartenance à l'Union européenne. A cet égard, la prise en compte des représentants locaux et régionaux dans la mise en œuvre des actions européennes (notamment grâce au principe de subsidiarité), permettrait aux citoyens de percevoir plus facilement les changements dans leur vie. On peut ainsi considérer que les régions de l'UE prennent part à la préservation de la démocratie européenne.

Il serait donc préférable pour l'UE de repenser sa façon de faire de la politique, car les institutions européennes paraissent souvent distantes et technocratiques aux yeux des citoyens. Il est crucial de donner du sens au projet européen et cela doit passer par une participation accrue des parlements régionaux à la prise de décisions européennes. Cela permettrait ainsi la considération des demandes des citoyens et de leur fournir des réponses adéquates.



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# 3

*The EU  
in a multipolar  
world*







# An Enlargement-Allergic Union, Ukraine and the four European circles

For many years, the European Union has been “enlargement-allergic” due to the feeling that the significant enlargements of 2004 and 2007 created a prolonged and challenging integration process. The accession of 12 new member states has seemingly diluted the functioning of EU institutions, giving rise to intricate constitutional challenges. With the rule of law backsliding in some member states, particularly evident in Hungary and Poland, the idea of suddenly having more “younger siblings” that they would potentially need to admonish as well, frightens the member states even more. However, as 2023 comes to an end, there is a notable shift, prompting both member states and the EU to reconsider. What factors have triggered this reassessment and brought the enlargement issue to the forefront?

Behind the perceived reluctance of the member states, which hinders any attempt at enlargement, lie not only calculations about potential challenges faced by the Union in expanding its membership but also the fact that, as members of the Union, states must address challenges arising from both the latest enlargements and losses (cf. Brexit). A feature of yesterday's era is this dual challenge faced by Union member states. Today's geopolitical landscape, however, especially considering Ukraine's suffering, has revitalised the stalled debate, placing the Union's enlargement on top of the political agenda.

Yet, the EU is not ready to welcome new members in terms of both its institutional framework and policy readiness.

In November, on a historic day marking 10 years of Euromaidan movement - a poignant expression of citizens aspiring to feel and call themselves European - the European Commission adopted its 2023 Enlargement Package. For the first time, and after the wearisome wait, states awaiting EU membership, namely the Western Balkans, Türkiye, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, have been assessed for their state of play and the progress on their respective paths towards the European Union. The primary focus of the package is on implementing fundamental reforms, along with providing clear guidance on the reform priorities ahead. These fundamentals of the EU accession process include the rule of law, fundamental rights, the functioning of democratic institutions, public administration reform and the economic criteria. A first conclusion would be that the anticipation of becoming a member of the Union has motivated positive reforms in the Western Balkans.

The starting point for a critical reflection is what the Union is about and where its purpose lies. This entire construction was built for the purpose of creating peace on the European continent. Gradually, this vision grew into something greater; ▀

an ever closer Union among the peoples of Europe, that believe in and share common values.

However, the perception of what the EU is about has changed over time. This stems from a lack of historical memory, primarily attributable to subsequent enlargements. Member states that joined later have a different story, not shared with those present since the Union's establishment - or at least its early stages. They carry, in principle, a different background and thus harbour a distinct perspective, detached from the extensive narrative of integration that preceded them. This is not inherently negative; it signifies the Union's evolution. The pivotal question remains though: is this evolution steering in the right direction?

Fast-forward to the present - 7 enlargements later, marked by numerous crises; financial, migration, Brexit, Covid-19, rule of law. Now, consider the scenario where a state currently embroiled in war seeks to join the Union. Legally, it may appear viable, but navigating the political landscape renders it an implausible feat.

### What's the urgency?

"You are fighting not only for your freedom, your democracy and your future, but for ours too. You are fighting for Europe. This is something we are painfully aware of" President Ursula von der Leyen told the Members of Verkhovna Rada, the Ukrainian Parliament.

Russia's war on Ukraine brutally altered the EU's landscape and priorities, leaving no other choice than to prioritise the long-awaited enlargement. The message from Granada being

"enlargement is a geo-strategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity" conveys that the EU has set sail for new challenges.

### The enlargement bill, please

The transition from the current EU27 to an EU37 undeniably suggests a potential dilution of both power and financial resources, particularly with the inclusion of a nation with a robust agricultural force recovering from the ravages of war.

What does this enlargement mean for the budget? A notable budget increase of 21%, translating to EUR 256 billion, compared to the previous year's EUR 186 billion. According to a Council document leaked to the Financial Times: "All member states will have to pay more to and receive less from the EU budget; many member states who are currently net receivers will become net contributors".

Nevertheless, as articulated in the meeting of leaders in Spain, maybe we should have a more open-minded approach and not treat this enlargement as "just a financial calculation".

### In "sailing high seas", reforms and enlargement go hand by hand

Accession of new members faces a stark reality: without amending the treaties, the prospects of any further enlargement remains a distant and challenging endeavour. A compelling perspective unfolds within the pages of the report "Sailing on High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century". ▸

A non-governmental Franco-German group, adopting a trans-European perspective, presents proposals in its report for a flexible reform and enlargement process in a way that would not pressure “any Member State to be part of an EU that it dislikes”.

While the opinions articulated do not reflect the official position of the two member states, it unveils a compelling narrative, considering that France vehemently opposed enlargement, while Germany stood against amendments to the treaties - which have not been amended since 2009. The oxymoron here lies in the apparent need for both enlargement and treaty amendments, as they appear intricately linked and essential at this time.

The experts, known as the “Group of Twelve”, propose reforms across three levels: firstly, enhancing the safeguarding of a fundamental principle—the rule of law, secondly, addressing institutional challenges, and ultimately, steering progress through the dual strategy of deepening and expanding the EU.

On the first level, there are proposals to fortify the EU's rule of law include beefing up budgetary conditions and refining Article 7 TEU through a treaty revision. Taking the elevator to the second level and the most challenging one: the institutional reform. The experts believe in a European Parliament comprised of maximum 751 members, as it currently stands, a Council of the EU of five, instead of three presidencies, each spanning half of an institutional cycle. In regard to the European Commission, there are two alternative possibilities: retaining the “one-member-state-one-Commissioner” logic necessarily goes with a

formal hierarchy or reducing the size of the College, which politically seems to be out of the debate.

Finally, on the third level, the recommendation would be for the EU and its aspiring members to prepare for an enlargement set for 2030. There is also the idea of an ‘regatta’ accession—rounds of smaller groups of countries following the merit-based approach and mindful of potential bilateral conflicts.

Acknowledging that not all states are prepared for or interested in being substantially integrated in the EU in the near future, the experts put forth a bold vision for the future of European integration, suggesting a nuanced approach through four distinctive tiers. In this structure, the core circle caters to states eager for deeper integration, while the second circle encapsulates all current and future EU members adhering to common political objectives and Article 2 TEU. Venturing into the proposed outer tiers, associate members in the first tier aim for streamlined associations, primarily focusing on the single market. The second outer tier prioritises geopolitical and political cooperation without binding EU law, emphasising shared interests in security, energy, and environmental policies. ▀





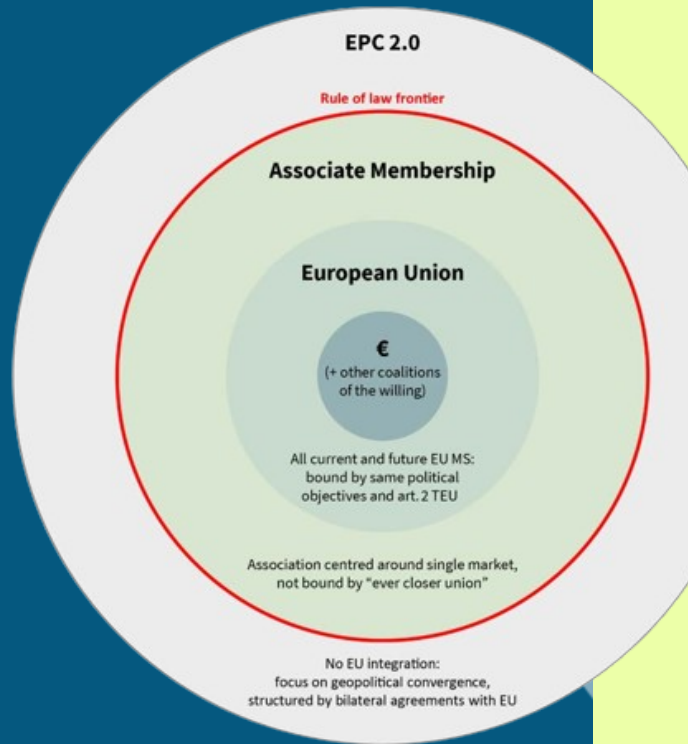
The vision of "the four European circles" reflects a shift towards flexibility in a larger European landscape, challenging the traditional notion of a one-size-fits-all integration model. It introduces, in a way, a form of differentiation - a 'Europe à la carte', a concept that the Community Method was designed to avoid.

### What the future holds

As the call for enlargement persists, the EU finds itself in a pressing need for substantial reforms. The careful consideration of these reforms is crucial to garner the acceptance and support of European citizens. The imperative for the EU lies in self-improvement to enhance its functionality and provide more robust protection for the interests of future generations.

When measured against a comparably substantial enlargement, as substantial as the 2004 expansion - the largest in EU history, this development is poised to disrupt the delicate balances we have painstakingly sought over the past decades. This underscores the importance of learning from the mistakes made in previous enlargements, emphasising the need to proceed with expansion only when fully prepared, avoiding hasty steps. However, we have witnessed that the anticipation of EU membership has played a pivotal role in propelling reforms in the Western Balkans, marking a substantial initial stride.

In the grand scheme of things, the challenges posed by this expansion are likely to yield long-term benefits that make the endeavour worthwhile. An investment that can lead to an unprecedented tale of democracy, economic triumph, peace and prosperity. It will soon become clear whether an antidote to the member states' allergy to enlargement has been found. One thing is certain: a very, very long way lies ahead.



European Integration in four concentric circles

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# Reach the East! The importance of encouraging electoral participation in Central and Eastern EU

The European elections are drawing near, and Brussels is buzzing with activity. The first signs of the electoral campaign are already visible. Every day, groups of people enter and leave the European Parliament, carrying bags of goodies from the different political groups. Meanwhile, the President of the Commission is measuring the last speeches of her mandate with great care. But what happens beyond the bubble of the European capital? How do the citizens of the Union perceive and participate in these elections?

## A low and uneven turnout of EU elections: a second-order effect

Voter turnout is not only a matter of political preferences, but also of civic engagement and awareness. We should not underestimate the importance of voting as the most direct form of participation in our representative democracies. And yet, electoral numbers remain unsatisfactory, barely exceeding 50% in 2019, a slight increase from the 43% in 2014 and 2009. But this average masks huge disparities between countries, with some as high as Belgium (89%) or Luxembourg (84%), where voting is compulsory. Some of the EU's most populous countries, such as Germany

and Spain, were above 60%, while Italy (56%) and France are more in line with the Union's average at 50%. The lowest rates can be found in Croatia and Slovenia (28%) as well as in Slovakia (22%).

A potential explanation for the average low attendance and national disparities can be found in the second order theory, which suggests that European elections are perceived by voters, parties and the media as less important than national elections. Therefore, voters tend to use EU elections as an opportunity to express dissatisfaction or protest against the ruling parties, or to vote for smaller or more radical parties that they would not support in a national election. This theory has been used to explain the low and declining turnout in EU elections and the rise of populist and Eurosceptic parties. In 2019, while some countries experienced a surge in voter engagement, others remained largely indifferent or disengaged from the elections. ▀

## Why do Central and Eastern Europe fail to participate?

The last EU elections saw a slight increase in attendance, reaching 50.95%, the highest level since 1994. This was partly due to voter mobilisation in some of the largest EU countries, such as Germany, Spain and France, which saw a turnout above the European average. Some of the factors that may have contributed to this increase were a growing awareness of the Union's role and impact on issues such as climate change, migration, security and trade, as well as the emergence of new political movements and parties that challenged traditional ones. However, this increase was not uniform across the block and some countries, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, still had very low participation rates, indicating a persistent East-West divide.

What we observe is that, overall, the countries with the lowest interest in European elections are those in Central and Eastern Europe, but what are the reasons for these disparities? Experts point to several factors to explain the lack of participation in EU elections in the East, such as historical and political transitions, cultural and linguistic barriers, and negative or sceptical attitudes towards the EU. For example, some of the countries have experienced a rapid and complex process of democratisation and integration after the fall of communism, which may have led to political fatigue and disillusionment among their citizens. Others face challenges such as corruption, populism and nationalism that undermine trust and support for the Union and its values. In addition, many people in the East feel disconnected

from the issues discussed in Brussels or Strasbourg and don't see how they affect their lives. They may also find it difficult to access information and communication in their own language, or to identify with the EU's diverse and multi-cultural identity.

It is a serious and critical issue for the Union, as it undermines the legitimacy and representativeness of its institutions. How can the EU claim to be a democratic and inclusive project if millions of its citizens do not bother to vote for their representatives? How can the EU meet the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century if it does not have the support and confidence of its citizens? It is crucial, as the title suggests, to encourage voter participation in Central and Eastern Europe and to reach out to those who feel distant or disconnected from the European project. There are some actions that the EU and national governments could do to raise voter turnout and participation in Central and Eastern Europe.

## Reach the East: A multifaceted approach

Education, language, campaigns, representation and engagement. These are some key strategies that the EU and national governments should prioritise and raise awareness to in order to increase engagement in the Central and Eastern countries, where the Union faces low visibility, scepticism and language barriers.

Education can foster a European identity and awareness among young and future voters, for instance through the Erasmus+ programme, which provides opportunities for learning ▀

and multilingualism. Campaigns can address negative attitudes and highlight the relevance and benefits of the EU. Initiatives such as the EU Protects campaign and the Conference on the Future of Europe show how the EU responds to citizens' concerns and tries to engage with them. Representation can increase trust and accountability in the EU, in particular through the European Parliament, ensuring participation and contributing to the legitimisation of the Union. Engagement can stimulate public interest and involvement in the EU, for example through the European Solidarity Corps and the Europe for Citizens Programme, which provide opportunities for volunteering, networking and supporting projects that contribute to the values and objectives of the EU.

Another way to increase voter interest and participation in EU elections could be to establish a single day of voting in all countries, instead of the current spread over a few days. This would create a sense of unity and common destiny among the citizens and make the elections more visible and exciting.

It would also avoid the risk of voters in some countries being influenced by the results of other countries that voted earlier. And what day could assume this role better than Europe Day, on the 9th of May?

### A few key lessons

The EU has achieved a lot, but it struggles to communicate this to its citizens, who are the ones who keep it alive. The upcoming elections will reveal how far we have come, or how much we have gone backwards. The EU is not perfect, but it is a worthy and unique project that needs the care and involvement of its citizens. Voting is crucial, but it doesn't simply drop from the sky, there has to be some passion and commitment to the cause. The East has been lagging behind in turnout, and it may not change much in six months, but that would only mean that the Union has to work harder to reach out to its citizens.



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# Vers une Conquête de l'Est ? Regard sur un (peut-être) futur élargissement de l'Union européenne

L'adage dit que Rome ne s'est pas faite en un jour... Il en va de même pour l'Union Européenne. Fondée le 25 mars 1957, à la suite du traité de Rome, l'Europe des 27 est le résultat de plusieurs vagues d'élargissement ; des 6 membres fondateurs que sont la France, l'Allemagne, l'Italie, la Belgique, les Pays-Bas et le Luxembourg, l'UE s'est tour à tour élargie à 9 en 1972 puis à 12 membres en 1985. Elle finit par compter 28 membres en 2013 suite à l'adhésion de la Croatie. Cependant, le Brexit a amèrement rappelé à l'UE qu'elle n'était pas à l'abri d'un retrait. Depuis le départ fracassant du Royaume-Uni en 2020, l'Union rassemble donc, sous la bannière étoilée, 27 Etats membres. (Mais) quid d'un nouvel élargissement ?

Parmi les pays qui souhaiteraient un jour rejoindre la bulle européenne, neuf ont reçu, plus ou moins récemment, le statut tant convoité de candidats à l'adhésion. Il s'agit, dans l'ordre, de la Turquie, de la Macédoine du Nord, du Monténégro, de la Serbie, de l'Albanie, de l'Ukraine, de la Moldavie, de la Bosnie-Herzégovine et, depuis le 14 décembre dernier, de la Géorgie. Jusqu'à récemment encore, la Géorgie n'était pas reconnue officiellement comme candidat mais seulement comme candidat potentiel, au même titre que le Kosovo. A l'aube des élections de 2024, se dirige-t-on vers une conquête de l'Est - et

principalement du Sud-Est européen - menée par l'UE ? Où en sont les demandes d'adhésion des neuf pays susmentionnés ? Quels obstacles doivent-ils franchir avant de voir s'ouvrir les Portes de l'Europe et quelles sont leurs chances d'un jour obtenir le sacro-saint pass d'entrée dans l'UE décerné par les Vingt-Sept ?

## Pourquoi vouloir entrer dans l'UE ?

Les raisons pour lesquelles certains pays gravitant autour de l'UE espèrent une future adhésion se résument principalement en un mot : économiques. Entrer dans l'Union européenne est la promesse d'une économie en meilleure santé, de davantage de prospérité, d'un accès privilégié au marché intérieur et d'un précieux gain de visibilité sur la scène internationale.

Une étude menée en 2019 a d'ailleurs démontré que certains Etats membres auraient enregistré des niveaux de PIB par habitant bien moindres (de l'ordre de 10% inférieurs en moyenne) s'ils n'avaient pas rejoint l'UE. Ce chiffre atteindrait même 31% en Pologne selon l'Institut Economique Polonais.

## Quelle marche à suivre et quels critères satisfaire ?

Obtenir le statut de candidats à l'adhésion - voté à l'unanimité par les Vingt-Sept - ne laisse en rien entendre une promesse d'une future accession. Pour que ce rêve puisse un jour devenir réalité, les pays candidats à l'adhésion doivent d'abord et avant tout se plier à des critères très stricts et subir la longue procédure d'adhésion prévue par l'Union Européenne.

Les premières démarches accomplies et le statut de candidats à l'adhésion en poche, les pays entrent dans une phase de préadhésion qui a pour objectif de les guider dans leur éventuelle entrée dans l'Union. Des instruments d'aide à la préadhésion (paradoxalement parfois déjà mis en place avant l'obtention du statut officiel de candidats à l'adhésion) sont fournis à certains pays, que leur candidature soit effective ou bien potentielle.

Ces instruments se traduisent principalement par des aides financières visant à soutenir les pays concernés dans la réforme d'un ou plusieurs pans de leur société (éducation, démocratie, gouvernance, innovation, compétitivité, environnement, etc.), avec en ligne de mire l'obligation pour ceux-ci de se conformer aux conditions essentielles à satisfaire pour espérer voir s'entre-ouvrir les portes de l'UE. A l'heure actuelle, 6 pays officiellement candidats à l'adhésion (l'Albanie, la Bosnie-Herzégovine, le Monténégro, la Macédoine du Nord, la Serbie et la Turquie) ainsi qu'un pays candidat potentiel (le Kosovo) bénéficient de cette assistance.

**Quid des conditions à satisfaire ?**





Ces conditions sine qua non, plus connues sous le nom de critères de Copenhague, sont au nombre de quatre. Trois d'entre eux incombent aux pays candidats à l'adhésion, il s'agit des critères politiques, économiques et de capacité administrative et institutionnelle. Les critères politiques requièrent l'existence d'institutions stables et démocratiques ainsi que le respect des droits fondamentaux, des droits de l'homme et des minorités. Les critères économiques assurent quant à eux que le pays repose sur une économie de marché suffisamment solide pour faire partie du marché unique et supporter les pressions concurrentielles y afférant. Finalement, le critère de capacité administrative et institutionnelle exige d'un pays candidat qu'il soit en mesure de se conformer aux devoirs de l'UE et d'implémenter l'ensemble des droits communs (l'acquis européen).

La quatrième condition requiert que l'UE reconnaisse sa capacité à accueillir de nouveaux membres tout en maintenant sa dynamique d'intégration inchangée.

Comme mentionné précédemment, l'obtention du statut de candidats à l'adhésion ne promet en rien une future véritable adhésion. En effet, une fois le statut obtenu et les critères de Copenhague satisfaits, l'UE entre dans une nouvelle phase de négociation à durée indéterminée. Celle-ci n'aboutira sur un « Oui, vous êtes admis. » qu'après l'accord à l'unanimité des Vingt-Sept Etats membres, précédé d'un avis favorable de la Commission Européenne.

## Où en sont les pays candidats à l'adhésion ?

Vers un élargissement en 2030 ? C'est le souhait exprimé par l'actuel Président du Conseil Européen, Charles Michel, face à l'impatience grandissante de ces pays candidats. Citons, par exemple, les Balkans occidentaux qui rêvent de suivre les traces de leur voisine croate mais demeurent pour la plupart sur liste d'attente depuis près de 20 ans en raison notamment des multiples dissensions au sein de l'ex-Yougoslavie et de l'opposition systématique de certains Etats membres à leur adhésion.

Selon plusieurs sources, le Monténégro était bien parti pour rafler la mise mais c'était sans compter l'émergence d'une forte instabilité politique qui a freiné sa progression. La récente formation d'un gouvernement pourrait ramener le pays dans le chemin de l'adhésion mais nul ne sait si (et quand) sa demande aboutira.

La Macédoine du Nord a vu son processus d'adhésion réellement démarrer concrètement en 2022 après que la Grèce et la Bulgarie aient enfin levé leur veto. Les deux pays ont bloqué le processus d'adhésion de la Macédoine de Nord pour deux raisons qui leurs sont propres ; d'une part, la Grèce n'acceptait pas qu'un pays qui porte le nom d'une région hellène accède à l'UE et d'autre part, la Bulgarie requérait la reconnaissance des minorités bulgares dans le pays. La Macédoine est donc devenue Macédoine du Nord et a reconnu la minorité bulgare dans sa Constitution. L'Albanie, dont la candidature était inhérente à celle de la Macédoine du Nord, a par conséquent subi le même sort quant à l'ouverture de son dossier.

Toutes deux doivent maintenant se concentrer sur les devoirs et obligations découlant de leur candidature.

La Commission a récemment exprimé son vœu de commencer les négociations relatives au cas bosniaque mais sous condition ; la condition étant bien évidemment la convergence vers des conditions économiques, politiques, administratives et institutionnelles suffisantes (ce qui est encore loin d'être le cas).

Seule tache au tableau : la Serbie. Le pays campe sur des positions fortement controversées et n'exprime pas l'envie d'en changer de sitôt. Parmi celles-ci, l'on peut citer ses proches relations avec Moscou, des rapports très tendus avec ses ex-compatriotes yougoslaves ou encore un refus quasiment catégorique d'instaurer un cadre juridique protégeant les minorités LGBTQIA+.

L'Ukraine et la Moldavie ont toutes deux obtenu le statut de candidats à l'adhésion en juin 2022, un accord précipité par l'invasion Russe en Ukraine quelques mois auparavant. Bien que de nombreux obstacles se dressent devant les deux pays – la guerre, qui affaiblit les institutions et empêche la mise en place de mesures efficaces, la pauvreté ou encore le degré bien trop élevé de corruption dans les domaines politiques et économiques – leur rêve européen reste accessible, du moins selon la Commission Européenne. Le 8 novembre dernier, la Commission conseillait en effet aux 27 Etats membres de commencer sans plus attendre les négociations quant à une possible entrée de l'Ukraine dans l'UE. L'urgence face à la crise ukrainienne ainsi que les menaces russes qui pèsent sur le pays ne sont pas étrangères à cette soudaine remise à l'agenda du cas ukrainien.



Le Sommet tenu à la mi-décembre a abondé dans le sens de la Commission ; d'une part, le Conseil Européen y a statué sur l'ouverture des négociations d'adhésion avec l'Ukraine et la Moldavie et, d'autre part, Bruxelles a également accordé le statut de candidat à l'adhésion à leur voisine, la Géorgie. Cette dernière n'a pas manqué de célébrer ce tournant presque historique, restant toutefois bien consciente que la route vers l'UE est encore longue.

Finalement, nul besoin de s'attarder sur la Turquie avec laquelle les pourparlers sont quasiment au point mort depuis 2018, et qui s'éloigne jour après jour des valeurs européennes en termes d'État de Droits, de liberté d'expression et de démocratie. De nombreuses organisations pointent du doigt des épisodes d'arrestations et d'emprisonnements arbitraires, des ingérences militaires ou encore une gestion douteuse de la crise migratoire ; tout cela sous un régime soumis aux diktats d'un président aux pouvoirs toujours plus étendus.

### Qu'en pense l'UE ?

Malgré les appels toujours plus nombreux de la Commission et du Conseil Européen à accélérer le processus d'élargissement, il est fort probable qu'il faille encore attendre plusieurs années avant un quelconque aboutissement des demandes d'adhésion.

Les chances de voir les Portes de l'Europe s'ouvrir restent malgré tout relativement minces pour ces neuf pays candidats, sans compter que plusieurs Etats membres sont sceptiques quant aux conséquences d'un tel élargissement en termes de gouvernance et de stabilité européenne. De plus, l'adhésion de chaque nouvel Etat Membre nécessite un vote à l'unanimité au sein du Conseil Européen, ce qui est loin d'être une tâche facile. Élargissement est en outre synonyme de réformes et de futures révisions des Traités afin de faire fonctionner une Union à 28, 30 ou 37. Des défis à la pelle qui resteront sans nul doute au cœur du débat post-électoral de 2024.



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# Democracy and Disinformation: The European Union's 2024 Elections Struggle in the Digital Age

In the digital age, disinformation has become a global phenomenon that affects every democracy worldwide. The European Union, as a political and economic entity, does not escape it.

During the 2019 European elections, the challenge of disinformation prompted legal and political responses aimed at addressing the threat to democracy. As the June 2024 elections draw near, disinformation presents comparable obstacles to the stability and integrity of the Union's democratic proceedings. The sophistication of artificial intelligence (AI) and the current global context present newer difficulties, and as a result, the EU has seen it as compulsory to address this potential threat and tackle the problems posed by the digitalisation of the world.

## Disinformation in the Digital Age: A Pervasive Challenge

Disinformation, defined as the deliberate spread of false information with the intent to deceive or manipulate, has been around for centuries. However, the digital era has expanded its reach and speed, with the widespread dissemination of false information becoming easier. This has contributed significantly to the phenomenon known as "infodemic", which has eroded trust in institutions and has triggered polarisation in society.

## Disinformation in the Electoral Context: Navigating Challenges in Democratic Expression

Elections are pivotal moments for democratic expression, which makes them especially prone to the impact of disinformation. In the campaign period leading up to elections, citizens seek information to form their decision and ultimately their vote. Thus, disinformation can distort public perception, impact the credibility of candidates, and undermine confidence in the electoral process.

The elections mark a crucial juncture for digital campaigning, the management of online discussions, and the broader trajectory of Europe. The lead-up to the 2024 elections has seen a surge in disinformation campaigns, as various actors attempt to exploit societal divisions and foster discord within member states. The digital age has also exposed the EU to foreign interference. Hostile state actors and external entities aim to exploit the interconnected nature of the EU by deploying cyber-attacks, spreading disinformation, and trying to shape electoral outcomes. There is a concern that these activities could keep fostering scepticism and further erode trust among citizens regarding democratic processes, public discourse, and the political institutions of the Union.

## The Role of AI in Disinformation: A Transformative Influence

AI has shifted the paradigm and landscape of disinformation. Advanced algorithms can analyse online behavioural patterns, identify vulnerabilities in information, and tailor messages to specific audiences. This has created “information bubbles”, where users receive largely biased information that reinforces their existing beliefs.

Moreover, the creation of false content, i.e., deepfakes, has been sophisticated through AI. These technologies enable the creation of manipulated videos and audio virtually indistinguishable from real ones, escalating the challenge of discerning truth from fiction.

## The Means for the Battle Against Disinformation

Forging a united front across the EU is crucial and requires a collaborative effort from government bodies, non-governmental organisations, and private sectors. Past initiatives, such as the EU’s 2018 Action Plan on Disinformation, underscore the necessity for a synchronised strategy to effectively combat the threat. Therefore, the EU should weave together harmonised responses from governmental and non-governmental entities throughout the EU.

Moreover, sustained pressure on social media giants to counteract online disinformation and hate speech should arise. Social media platforms are now under heightened scrutiny. Tech giants are under growing pressure to address the proliferation of disinformation on their platforms.

The EU must delicately navigate the balance between preserving freedom of expression and holding these platforms accountable for the content they host. Regulatory measures and collaborative efforts between governments and tech companies are pivotal elements in managing this complex equation.

Mitigating the impact of disinformation demands a multifaceted strategy, including the implementation of robust media literacy programs. Empowering citizens to critically assess information, identify reliable sources and comprehend the repercussions of sharing misleading content is imperative. The EU must invest in educational initiatives that equip its population with the skills needed to navigate the intricate digital landscape and to make well-informed decisions when casting their votes.

Legally, the EU has made huge steps, notably with the introduction of the European Action Plan for Democracy in December 2020, and the following ratification of the Digital Services Act (DSA) in 2022. These have boosted free and fair elections, as well as media freedom, and have heightened the accountability of online platforms. The DSA was a comprehensive move aimed at tackling various issues linked to digital platforms that could jeopardise democratic elections. To boost the fight against disinformation threats, the EU has set up a Rapid Alert System, facilitating the swift exchange of information and coordinated responses among member states and platforms. Adding to its toolkit, the European Digital Media Observatory is actively monitoring and countering disinformation campaigns. Acknowledging the potential threat to e-commerce, these pieces of legislation

prioritise user-centric design over advertising-driven algorithms and tackle upfront the issue of hate speech, as defined by the EU.

Diverse avenues remain open for member states' governments and NGOs to explore, playing a part in a diverse strategy aimed at adeptly confronting the intricate challenges posed by disinformation.

### What Lies Ahead: The Disinformation Battle Will Go On

There is no magic wand or quick fix for the disinformation challenge. Instead, it calls for a range of measures possessing a holistic approach.

While the initial steps with the Action Plans are commendable, there is a need to broaden its scope. There needs to be a collaborative effort in research and analysis of disinformation at the national level, which will empower EU institutions to deepen their understanding of how democracies can stand strong against disinformation and shape policies accordingly.

A robust legal framework needs to be created, and it must tackle two crucial aspects. Firstly, it should define the rules for online political campaigns. Secondly, it must outline the responsibilities of online platforms regarding transparency in political ads, exposure to disinformation, and the protection of free speech.

It is not easy, and it will pose a challenge for the European Union, but given that it is democracy that is at stake, it needs to be done.



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# Foreign interferences in the 2024 election



## What we expect and how are we protected?

With just a few months to go before the European elections in June 2024, the European institutions are mobilising to defend this unique continent-wide exercise of democracy against foreign interference.

The next European legislation will address critical issues for the European project, including the future of EU enlargement, the regulation of the digital sphere and the safeguarding of European democracy. The outcome of the 2024 elections will shape the EU and the world for years to come. As the European Parliament's powers have increased, so has the interest in its democratic processes.

Unfortunately, this increased interest has also attracted the attention of malicious third countries and geopolitical competitors.

### The challenge of foreign interferences

Foreign interference in democratic processes has become a major issue in recent years. From disinformation campaigns to attempts to disrupt the information systems that regulate voting, these activities are often funded by foreign states seeking to influence and exert control over liberal democracies.

The forthcoming EU elections are not immune to the possibility of such interference. Since 2019, widespread mistrust of scientific information and government responses have been actively encouraged by some foreign actors and amplified through social media. Notably, this has occurred for the disinformation campaign orchestrated by Russia to lay the groundwork for the invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Foreign interference, disinformation, and attacks on democracy are expected to continue in greater numbers and sophistication in the run-up to the European Parliament elections. The challenges posed by external actors seeking to manipulate democratic processes require a proactive and vigilant response from the Union in order to safeguard the integrity of the electoral system and democratic principles.

### How do these interferences look like?

Research shows that in most countries, election interference is primarily aimed at influencing voters, rather than directly manipulating the electoral infrastructure to change the number of votes cast. These interventions often take the form of disinformation campaigns, strategically designed to support specific politicians or parties closely aligned with the ideals and objectives of foreign states.

One study suggests that it is possible to classify these interventions according to the timeframe of their implementation in relation to the election day. Hence, they can range from long-term strategies that may persist regardless of the electoral cycle, to actions taken within three months before, during or after the elections.

In a 2012 study, Corstange and Marinov proposed a distinction between two types of foreign intervention: partisan intervention, where a foreign power openly supports one side, and process intervention, where a foreign power aims to uphold the rules of democratic competition regardless of the election outcome, mainly to destabilise the country where the interference is put into practice.

Building on this theory, Jonathan Godinez expanded the categorisation of interventions. He introduced globally motivated interventions, where a country intervenes in another country's election for the benefit of international audiences, and self-motivated interventions, where a country intervenes to advance its own interests or well-being through the electoral process.

### A lesson from 2019

Looking back at the previous elections, we can gain some insights into what we might expect in the near future. The majority of member states already have total or partial bans on foreign donations to political parties and candidates in place. However, some, such as Italy, still have no such restrictions. Russia's alleged financial support for Deputy Prime and Interior Minister Matteo Salvini's Lega ahead of the 2019 election may have been legal, but it remains highly subversive and arguably corrupt. During a state visit to Moscow last October, Salvini and one of his close advisers reportedly discussed Russian funding for the Lega through an opaque gas purchasing agreement.

Even in European countries where laws restrict the sources of political funding, foreign authoritarian actors have found

ways around these restrictions to support their allies. France for example prohibits companies, trade unions and other collectives, including foreign governments, from donating to political parties. However, the law does not prevent parties from obtaining loans from foreign banks. This loophole allowed Marine Le Pen's far-right Front National to secure an EUR 9.4 million loan from a Russian bank in 2019. While the legality of the loan may not be in question, it is undeniable that senior Russian government officials played a role in orchestrating the deal, signalling Moscow's clear support for a presidential candidate in another country and thereby influencing the elections at the EU level.

## Prospective on the EU 2024 Elections

The European Parliament has called for stronger measures to counter potential foreign interference in next year's elections, with a particular focus on resilience and information manipulation. The warning is contained in a report by the Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation. The report was adopted in plenary with 469 votes in favour, 71 against and 75 abstentions.

In the text, the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) highlighted various forms of interference, including on online platforms, protection of critical infrastructure and strategic sectors, interference in electoral processes, covert funding of political activities by foreign actors and resilience to cyber-attacks. The report specifically addresses Russian and Chinese interference in the EU, in countries seeking EU membership,

and in countries in the Global South.

Parliament condemned the disturbing phenomenon of disinformation for hire, where providers offer disinformation services to both state and non-state actors, often via the dark web, to undermine electoral processes. To combat illicit financial transactions entering the EU's political system from third countries, MEPs urged the Commission to facilitate the tracking of donations and called on member states to urgently address the issue of donations from third countries to national political parties.

The MEPs also highlighted the risks of economic dependency, espionage and sabotage when foreign companies gain influence over critical EU infrastructure. They noted that Chinese shipping companies have already acquired the majority or significant shares of more than 20 European ports. MEPs also recommended a ban on TikTok at all levels of national government and EU institutions. They called on the Council and the Commission to exclude the use of equipment and software from manufacturers in high-risk countries, in particular China and Russia, such as ByteDance, Huawei, ZTE, Kaspersky, NtechLab or Nuctech.

From the outset, Parliament has called for a coordinated EU strategy, including new initiatives as well as better enforcement of existing rules. They called for adequate funding to fight disinformation and safeguard democratic processes. MEPs further asked the Commission to develop an effective package to defend democracy and legislation to counter hybrid threats in the EU, taking into account proposals from the Conference on the Future of Europe. They also called for the creation of a

permanent European Parliament body to monitor and combat foreign interference. With the adoption of this report, the European Parliament aims to meet the expectations of EU citizens by stepping up efforts against foreign interference and to counter disinformation, online threats and propaganda in an objective and factual manner.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, as the June 2024 European elections come closer, the European Parliament is actively countering foreign interference, crucial for addressing the EU's future challenges. Major threats include disinformation campaigns and attempts to disrupt voting systems, exemplified by Russia's 2022 campaign preceding the Ukraine invasion. There are currently varying degrees of restrictions on foreign donations among EU member states, with notable gaps like Italy. The alleged Russian support for Matteo Salvini's party in 2019 underscores the subversive nature of such actions.

In response, the European Parliament called for robust measures, focusing on online platforms, critical infrastructure protection, and covert financing, extending scrutiny to Russian and Chinese interference beyond the EU. Advocating for a coordinated EU strategy, enhanced enforcement, and ample funding, the Parliament aims to fortify resilience. Proposed measures include a defence of democracy package, legislation against hybrid threats, and a permanent parliamentary body.

By adopting this report, the Parliament addresses citizens' expectations by intensifying efforts to combat foreign interference and disinformation. Safeguarding democratic principles becomes crucial as the 2024 elections approach for the EU's future.

What will happen is still in the shadows, but it is undeniable that the European Elections are gaining in weight on the world stage and are thus more susceptible to becoming the victims of foreign interference.



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# L'indépendance énergétique européenne : projet utopique ?

La géopolitique de l'énergie est devenue l'un des enjeux majeurs dans le paysage politique mondial. Les élections européennes de juin 2024 joueront un rôle crucial dans la définition de la trajectoire énergétique du continent. Alors que l'Europe cherche à diversifier ses sources d'approvisionnement en énergie et à réduire sa dépendance à l'égard de fournisseurs externes, les résultats des élections européennes auront un impact significatif sur la formulation des politiques énergétiques. Dans le contexte actuel, examinons de plus près comment les élections européennes influencent la dépendance énergétique de l'Europe.

## La géopolitique de l'énergie en Europe

L'Europe, actuellement, dépend fortement des importations d'énergie pour répondre à ses besoins croissants. Les principaux fournisseurs d'énergie de l'UE incluent la Russie, les pays du Moyen-Orient et certains États membres de l'OPEP. Selon les données officielles d'Eurostat, l'Union européenne a importé 56 % de son énergie totale en 2021. La Russie a contribué à l'apport d'environ 28% des importations de l'Union Européenne de pétrole non-raffiné, 44% des imports de gaz naturel, et 52% des combustibles fossiles. Cette dépendance crée une vulnérabilité géopolitique.

Les fluctuations des relations internationales peuvent directement affecter la stabilité de l'approvisionnement énergétique,

ainsi qu'augmenter la volatilité des prix.

Depuis le début de la guerre en Ukraine, l'Europe a tenté de réduire cette vulnérabilité liée aux hydrocarbures russes, notamment celle liée au gaz, pour essayer de freiner la montée affolante des prix énergétiques. Dès 2022, l'objectif a été de baisser de deux tiers les importations par l'Union Européenne de gaz provenant de Russie.

## Influence des élections sur les politiques énergétiques

Les élections offriront une plateforme permettant aux partis politiques de présenter leurs visions et leurs engagements en matière de politique énergétique. Les citoyens européens ont, ainsi, l'occasion de choisir des représentants dont les positions reflètent leurs préoccupations en matière d'énergie, tout en déterminant la position de l'Europe sur la scène énergétique mondiale. Certains partis pourraient plaider en faveur d'une transition énergétique accélérée vers les énergies renouvelables, réduisant ainsi la dépendance aux combustibles fossiles, comme cela a été la plupart du temps le cas durant le dernier cycle politique européen. D'autres pourraient cependant soutenir des partenariats renforcés avec des pays producteurs de pétrole et de gaz, accentuant potentiellement la dépendance envers ces ressources.

## L'équilibre entre diversification et dépendance

La diversification des sources d'approvisionnement énergétique est souvent au cœur des débats électoraux. Certains partis pourraient envisager de promouvoir l'idée d'une stratégie visant à augmenter la part des énergies renouvelables dans le mix énergétique, tandis que d'autres pourraient insister sur l'exploitation responsable des ressources nationales et internationales, y compris les hydrocarbures conventionnels et non conventionnels. L'équilibre entre la diversification et la dépendance est délicat, et les résultats des élections peuvent influencer la manière dont cette balance est atteinte.

Durant l'actuel cycle politique européen, la commission a mis en place un nouveau plan intitulé RePowerEU. L'objectif de ce plan est de mettre fin à cette dépendance et d'intensifier l'utilisation des énergies renouvelables d'ici à 2027. La somme de ce plan est estimée à plus de 210 milliards d'euros. Ce dernier se concentrera sur quatre secteurs : l'innovation, l'investissement durable, l'inclusion sociale et la création d'emplois.

Une des conditions pour avoir accès à ces fonds, est qu'au moins 30 % de ces nouveaux emplois impliqués contribuent à rendre la zone européenne neutre en carbone. La Commission souhaite - grâce notamment et principalement à l'énergie solaire et éolienne - « permettre à l'Europe de se passer totalement des hydrocarbures russes 'bien avant 2030' ». La stratégie sera ainsi double: "la diversification de l'approvisionnement en gaz de l'UE pour remplacer les importations russes à court terme,

et l'intensification du déploiement des énergies renouvelables et des mesures d'économie d'énergie à long terme".

Par la suite, en mars de cette année, les États membres et députés ont convenu de passer la part des renouvelables dans le mix énergétique européen pourcentage de 22 % à 42,5 %. Cette transition du simple au double permettra de diminuer les émissions de CO2 et éviter l'utilisation du gaz russe.

Selon une étude de l'Institut de Potsdam sur l'impact climatique, l'Europe a la capacité d'atteindre l'indépendance énergétique dès 2040, à condition qu'elle investisse 2.000 milliards d'euros dans les énergies renouvelables d'ici la fin de la décennie. Le budget est considérable, mais possible sachant par exemple qu'en 2023 seulement les États Membres ont dépensé 729 milliards d'euros supplémentaires pour protéger leurs citoyens de la crise énergétique causée en grande partie par l'invasion en Ukraine. Pour rappel, à la suite de l'invasion russe en Ukraine, l'Union européenne a imposé à la Russie de multiples sanctions. La Russie a, en réponse, diminué de près de 80% le débit de ses gazoducs en direction de l'Europe.

## Une Europe Unie, mais pas sur tout

Les politiques adoptées par les membres de l'Union Européenne, qui sont autonomes en matière de sources d'approvisionnement et de mix énergétique, déterminent également l'indépendance énergétique globale. D'après les données d'Eurostat, il existe une grande variabilité du taux de dépendance énergétique

entre les pays de l'Union, allant de 97 % pour Malte à 1,4 % pour l'Estonie. Certains États ont su réduire leur dépendance grâce à un mix énergétique plus largement basé sur les énergies renouvelables, comme la Finlande ou l'Estonie. D'autres au contraire ont vu leur dépendance s'accroître à cause par exemple du déclin envers l'énergie nucléaire ou des énergies fossiles nationales commençant à se faire plus rares, comme par exemple la Pologne ou le Danemark.

Le niveau gouvernemental n'est cependant pas le seul niveau de pouvoir pouvant mener à l'action. Ainsi, il est crucial de faire participer les citoyens à la conception et à la réalisation de ces projets en leur donnant la possibilité de participer, de consulter et de co-investir. Une participation plus accrue de ces acteurs au sein des projets permettrait de développer l'acceptabilité citoyenne envers ces projets qui sont parfois porteurs d'oppositions, que cela soit sur des fondements esthétiques ou environnementaux.

### La sécurité au centre des préoccupations

La sécurité énergétique est une priorité constante pour l'Union européenne. Les citoyens européens souhaitent s'assurer que leurs besoins énergétiques soient satisfaits de manière stable et durable. Les résultats des élections peuvent donc influencer la manière dont les gouvernements européens abordent cette question cruciale, que ce soit par le biais de politiques visant à renforcer les infrastructures énergétiques, à diversifier les sources d'approvisionnement ou à encourager l'efficacité énergétique.

Les futurs eurodéputés devront cependant travailler avec des législations importantes qui ont été établies avant leur arrivée avec des objectifs de long-terme, comme le « Fit for 55 package » mis en place pour diminuer les émissions de gaz à effet de serre d'au moins 55% d'ici à 2030 et avec pour finalité l'objectif d'atteindre la neutralité carbone d'ici 2050.





Changer ses sources d'approvisionnement et types d'énergie prend du temps. C'est une transformation graduelle qui peut néanmoins être à l'aide d'efforts et d'investissements venant de tous niveaux, tant bien européen, que national, ou local.



L'Europe doit prendre ce train d'indépendance énergétique tant qu'il est en marche et saisir l'opportunité de devenir leader mondial de la transition énergétique, domaine jouant un rôle clé dans la transition climatique. Il faudra d'une part utiliser le savoir-faire, les technologies et l'expérience réglementaire que l'Union Européenne possède pour développer cette transition, mais aussi servir d'exemple sur la scène internationale.

En conclusion, les élections européennes à venir exerceront une influence significative sur la géopolitique de l'énergie en Europe. Les résultats de ces élections détermineront les orientations politiques, les priorités et les engagements des gouvernements européens en matière d'énergie. La dépendance énergétique de l'Europe est un enjeu complexe qui nécessite une approche équilibrée entre diversification des sources et relations avec les principaux fournisseurs. Ainsi, les électeurs européens jouent un rôle crucial dans la définition de la trajectoire énergétique du continent, et ce nouveau cycle électoral offre une opportunité pour remodeler la politique énergétique européenne pour répondre aux défis actuels et futurs.



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# Is the European Far-Right Atlanticist or Europeanist?

If we look at the composition of the European Parliament, we soon realise that there are two parliamentary groups that can be considered part of the far-right; the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and the Identity and Democracy (ID). With all the members of these groups coming from different member states, placing them on the political spectrum becomes a complicated task.

Migration, for example, seems like a common denominator for the far-right in Europe. However, when adding elements of Euroscepticism to the equation, we begin perceiving interesting nuances. In this regard, the question of NATO membership also sparks debates within the far-right.

This article will briefly review the positions of far-right parties in EU member states regarding the North Atlantic Alliance. The aim is to try and understand whether the European far-right has an Atlanticist or Europeanist tendency, or whether it shows a more complex matrix of factors that operate intersectionally. The relevance of this question lies in the possible existence of political forces at the heart of European democracy that seek the creation of a military alliance exclusively for European countries. This endeavour is particularly insightful against the background of the upcoming EU elections and their outcome.

There are several elements to be considered in this discussion.

One of them being the traditional nature of the far-right's relation with Putin's Russia, the influence of geopolitics and history in the construction of identities in Eastern Europe, as well as belonging to one or the other of the two aforementioned far-right parliamentary groups. These three dynamics are not isolated and generally operate transversally.

Broadly speaking, the European far-right has been strongly linked to Putin's regime, showing different sorts of alliances between the leaders of different political parties. The most paradigmatic cases have traditionally been those of Marine Le Pen in France, and Matteo Salvini and Silvio Berlusconi in Italy. In a simplistic way, the relationship between the European far-right and Putin is based on the shared vision of a nationalist conception of the sovereign state, the Europe of brave peoples, and a world without liberal hegemons. Other elements that emerge from these relationships are conservatism, anti-communism, anti-globalism, and anti-Islamism. Further, this conception of the world has influenced the position that some far-right leaders have on NATO. As for Le Pen, her party, the Rassemblement National, includes in its program a proposal for a revision of the military relations with Russia.



However, the link between the European far-right and Russia shows divisions when we look at Eastern Europe. Here, the cases of Poland with primarily Law and Justice (PiS), Estonia with the Conservative People's Party of Estonia, Finland with the Finns Party (PS), and the Czech Republic with Freedom and Direct Democracy, can be seen as advocates for an Atlanticist position. This can be traced back to an anti-Russian sentiment in reaction to their historical past with the Soviet Union and, more recently, Putin's Russia, especially since the large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

In this sense, the case of the PS in Finland marked a breaking point for the party with its traditional parliamentary group in Brussels. Affiliated to ID, it switched to the other, lesser far-right group, the ECR. When Finland and Sweden applied for NATO membership in May 2022, the lack of support and the strong criticism and rejection of the majority of ID members led the PS to seek support within the ECR, which matched its vision regarding Finland's security. This is hardly surprising when checking the composition of the ID group. Here, Le Pen and Salvini together account for 41 of 60 seats, and both have fiercely criticised Finland's entry into the military alliance.

According to Politico, the PS unanimously decided the change of allegiance to the ECR, whose **“member parties are united by the uncompromising defence of Western civilization and the European security policy architecture”**, an objective which the PS described as being best promoted through membership in the ECR group.

It is not the first time that members of the far-right emphasise the differences between parties in one group or another. Le Pen, during an interview in Italy, clearly differentiated herself from Giorgia Meloni. **“I’m not Meloni’s twin sister”**, stated Le Pen. She added that she rather shared the vision of Matteo Salvini, leader of Lega: **“I remain faithful to Salvini. I remain Eurosceptic, convinced that France should leave NATO's integrated command.”**

It is true that Meloni gained prominence during the government in which Salvini participated, as the main opponent of any internationally imposed dogma, especially from the Brussels-DC axis. However, since she came to power, she has notably toned down her Euroscepticism and anti-internationalism, and has since been seen by Le Pen as a “Pro-NATO” leader. Additionally, the main character in Italian far-right relations with Russia has not been played by Meloni, but rather by Salvini, who has completely captured all attention with his pictures wearing a T-shirt with Putin's face on the Red Square in Moscow. Moreover, in 2016, he suggested that Italy should withdraw from NATO if the threats to Russia negatively impacted the Russo-Italian economic relations.

Meloni's case is interesting because it is true that she has softened her Euroscepticism, bringing it closer to positions similar to Vox in Spain, a political party that manifests absolutely no criticism towards NATO. On the one hand, after being elected Prime Minister of Italy, Meloni went to Brussels, where she met NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, to reiterate Italy's commitment to the military alliance.

At the same time, in the recent Spanish elections in July 2023, in the 178 pages of Vox's electoral program, there is only one mention of NATO, and it is to demand the inclusion of Spanish territories in Africa; Ceuta and Melilla, in the protection of the treaties. Both parties, Vox and Fratelli d'Italia, share a parliamentary group in Brussels, as does the PiS-party, who is a clear supporter of the military alliance, just as the aforementioned Finnish PS.

Another country worth mentioning is Germany, although the presence of the German far-right in the European Parliament is proportionally lower than that of the rest. However, if the party's relations with Putin have traditionally been good, so has its evaluation of the military alliance, as reflected in the party's manifestos since 2016 and 2017 despite some internal critics. The war in Ukraine has only reinforced these ideas, as in Germany, the Nazi past has a strong influence on foreign and security policy decisions. In this line, it is not surprising that the country, despite being an economic powerhouse, has decided to limit its military development to a more secondary level, unlike countries such as France.

In this regard, German NATO membership implies an effect of inertia and neutrality, as it does not want and does not have to make decisions by itself that involve armed interventions and military participation in third countries. The same line lets us explain the hesitant position of German Chancellor Olaf Scholz when it comes to sending military arsenal to Ukraine or supplying European partners who sent a lot of their equipment, like Poland.

At the opposite extreme of this endless and historical German question, we find the frustrated French dream of creating a European military apparatus, where France's military and nuclear superiority in Europe could potentially be translated into a stronger French leadership. Although we cannot conclude that Le Pen's intentions would be to create this military umbrella, it is true that when it comes to defence, the Rassemblement National's priority for France is to exit NATO and to establish strategic military relations and partnerships.

Other far-right parties such as the Vlaams Belang in Belgium, also historically linked to Putin, have changed their discourse towards him, involving a reconsideration of their previous statements about the military alliance. In this regard, the Belgian extremist party stated not just its desire for Belgium to leave NATO, but also for NATO to leave Belgium. However, the party has nowadays become aware of Belgium's historical pragmatic and neutral role in international relations, and supports the country's membership in the alliance as the only security measure for Belgium in a world of increasing threats.





In conclusion, we see that we cannot classify the variety of positions of the far-right regarding NATO. Generally, a repeated element has been its historical relation with Russia and Putin, although there are significant exceptions, which have been reinforced in the current context of the war in Ukraine. Other lines that continue to be repeated, even by those who have shifted their discourse like the Vlaams Belang in Belgium, include the perception of NATO as an extension of DC to promote its interests. Others refer to the alliance as an anti-Chinese shield, some advocate for dialogue with Russia, others see it as a tool to guarantee a minimum of security, and still others see it as a necessary resource only for cases where it is truly necessary and not for wars in third countries.

In any case, it will be interesting to see how different far-right political parties shape their manifestos and the way they frame NATO within the discussions on European defence, which are bound to become more prevalent in the run-up to the 2024 elections.



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