



The Aftermath of the 2024 European Parliament Elections: Who Won, Who Lost, and What's Next?

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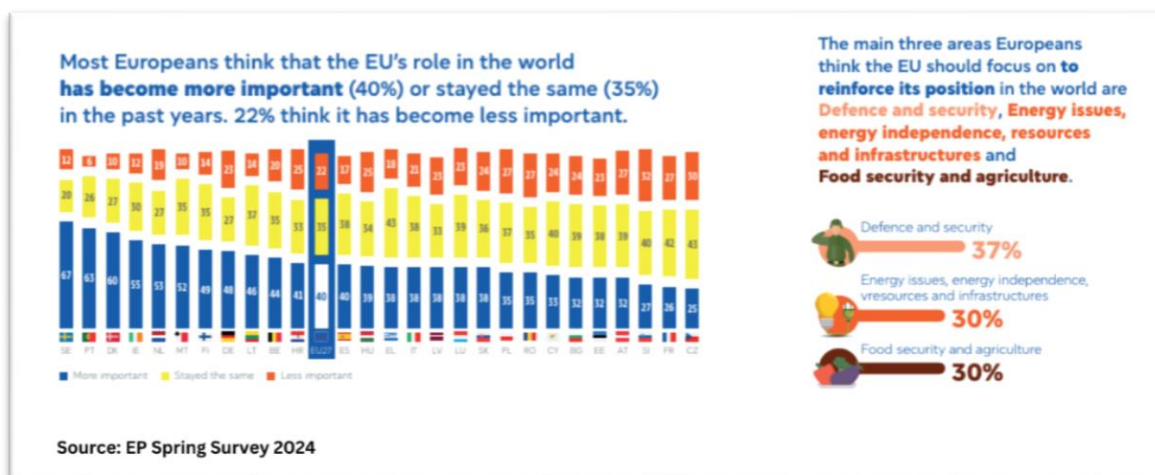
- ✦ The 2024 European Parliament elections had the highest voter turnout in 30 years at 51.01%, demonstrating strong EU citizen engagement amid global geopolitical and economic challenges.
- ✦ The center-right European People's Party (EPP) won the most seats with 189, while right-wing and eurosceptic parties gained ground, particularly in France, Germany, and Italy, reflecting a shift in voter sentiments.
- ✦ The rivalry between European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Council President Charles Michel intensified, with Michel seeking to exclude von der Leyen from leadership discussions, highlighting internal EU power struggles.
- ✦ The elections have significant implications for EU policies, including the Green Deal and enlargement agenda, with challenges posed by right-wing gains and the need for strategic leadership and robust policy frameworks to navigate these dynamics.
- ✦ Regardless of the leadership in these institutions, EU-Turkey relations are not expected to change. Interactions with third countries are likely to continue in a transactional manner.

In 2024, the world faces an exceptional election year, with approximately 1.5 billion people voting across more than 50 countries, impacting nearly half of the global population.¹ From regions spanning South Africa to the South Pacific, Europe, and the Americas, these elections have been significantly impacting global political, social, and economic landscapes.

These elections not only reflect democratic participation on an unprecedented scale but also occur against a backdrop of rising geopolitical tensions and economic uncertainties. Rising inequality and public distrust in governments pose significant challenges, as many feel disconnected from the political process. This distrust is fueled by issues like disinformation, polarization, and shrinking civic spaces. Addressing these concerns will require comprehensive reforms to ensure inclusive representation and protect fundamental rights.

One of these crucial moments took place last weekend. European Parliament (EP) elections were held from 6-9 June, with voter turnout reaching its highest point in 30 years, as 51.01% of the 357 million eligible citizens casting their ballots. Since 1979, MEPs have been directly elected by the citizens of the European Union every five years. This turnout represents a slight increase from the 2019 elections, which had a turnout of 50.66%, indicating EU citizens' continued belief in the Union and desire to participate in its governance.

Leading up to the elections, the *EP Spring Survey 2024*² revealed that respondents prioritize peace and democracy as key values for the European Parliament's upcoming legislative term. Strong support was also evident for protecting human rights, freedom of speech, and the rule

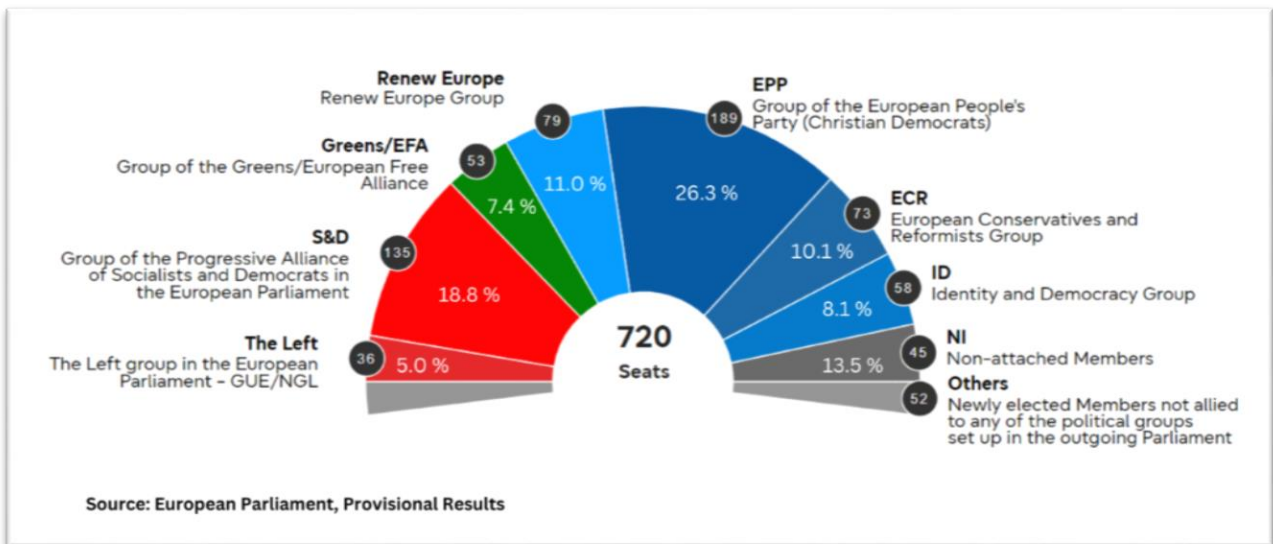


¹ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), A 'Super Year' for Elections, <https://www.undp.org/super-year-elections>

² EP Spring 2024 Survey: Use your vote - Countdown to the European elections, DG COMM, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3272>

of law across Europe, indicating widespread approval of EU membership. While opinions vary among member states, a majority believe their countries have benefited from EU membership. Europeans also agree on the EU’s crucial role in enhancing defense and security, achieving energy independence, and ensuring food security globally.

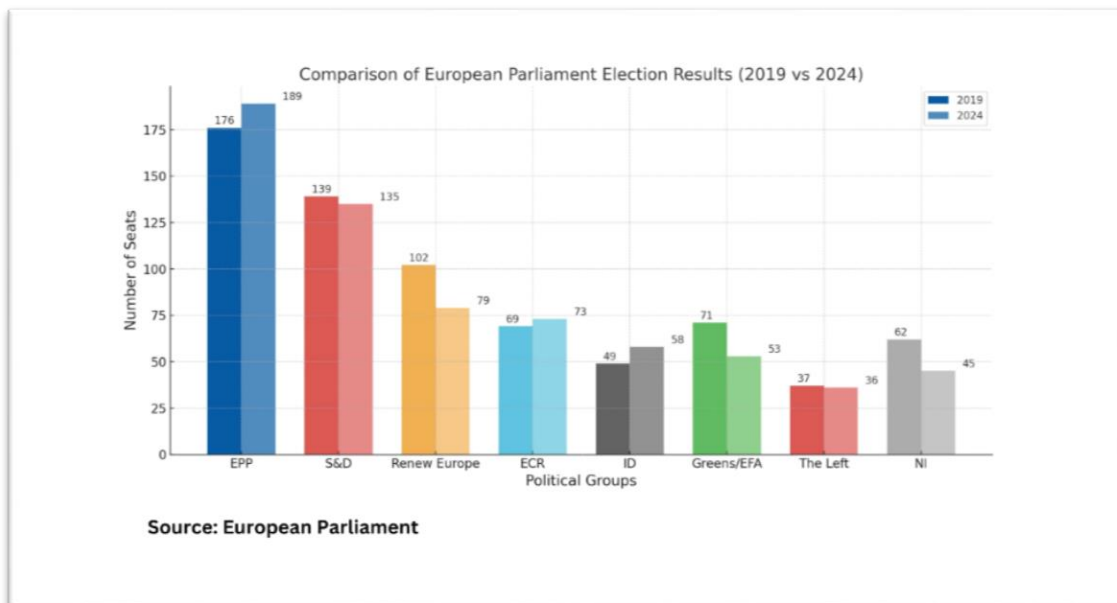
Although there has not been a dramatic change in the results compared to the 2019 elections, national political crises have surfaced prominently after the June elections. This marks the first time that the outcomes of EU elections have had such significant implications at the national level. The extreme right surged in France after Marine Le Pen's Rally National (RN) victory led by Jordan Bardella, resulting in the dissolution of parliament by President Emmanuel Macron. In Germany, the far-right populist party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) emerged as the second-largest party, and in Italy, Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia (FDI) secured a significant victory.



The center-right European People's Party (EPP) emerged as the largest group with 189 seats, increasing from 176 seats in 2019. They were followed by the center-left Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), which saw a slight decrease from 139 seats to 135, and the liberal Renew Europe group securing 79 seats. Compared to the 2019 results, Renew Europe experienced a significant drop, going from 102 seats. Right-wing and eurosceptic parties also made notable gains, with the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and Identity and Democracy (ID) groups obtaining 73 and 58 seats respectively. The Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA) garnered 53 seats, reflecting strong voter concern for environmental issues. Meanwhile, The Left group maintained a presence with 36 seats, and a significant

number of non-attached and newly elected members not allied to any political group totaled 97 seats.

The elections showed varied results across Europe, with green parties gaining in Nordic countries, centrists holding ground in Portugal and Spain, and nationalist movements advancing in France, Germany, as well as Austria, Southern Cyprus, Greece, the Netherlands. Despite headlines suggesting a surge of the far right, pro-EU centrist parties still command a majority, albeit slightly reduced.³



One step behind...

Leading up to the EP elections, three main topics dominated the discussions. Firstly, the longstanding rivalry between the heads of two key EU institutions: the European Commission and the Council of the EU, and how this would affect the new structure. Traditionally, the Council handles external relations, security, and defense policies, while the Commission oversees trade relations and partnerships with third countries. However, Ursula von der Leyen has emerged as a prominent figure in security matters, emphasizing in her speeches the humanitarian situation in the Middle East, ongoing support for Ukraine, and the prosperity and

³ European Parliament, 2024 European election results, Last Update: 14.06.2024, <https://results.elections.europa.eu/>

security of the Union. This prominence has potentially contributed to the escalating tension between the two leaders, leaving Charles Michel sometimes feeling sidelined.

The rivalry between Charles Michel and Ursula von der Leyen is often seen as involving personal friction and strategic maneuvering. Before the elections, criticizing Von der Leyen's term in office, Michel accused her leadership of the European Commission of damaging Europe's reputation, claiming the Commission has become overly politicized by making statements without member states' consensus.⁴ Recently, Michel reportedly proposed excluding Ursula von der Leyen from discussions regarding her own job and future prospects in an upcoming meeting on June 17.⁵ However, European countries have resisted Michel's efforts to undermine von der Leyen and she will be joining the meeting next week. This move is seen as Michel's effort to influence EU leadership decisions, sparking controversy and highlighting their ongoing power struggle within European politics. This dynamic will be crucial to observe in the post-elections period.

Secondly, the rule of law issues, especially concerning Hungary, were prominently debated. Concerns about significant deficiencies in justice, anti-corruption efforts, media freedom, and civil society prompted MEPs to urge the European Commission to suspend Hungary's controversial laws affecting elections. MEPs also criticized the Commission's decision to release frozen EU funds to Hungary, calling for a reversal. The Parliament has initiated legal action against the European Commission over the release of €10.2 billion in frozen funds to Hungary.⁶ Indeed, the lawsuit added pressure on Von der Leyen as she was navigating her reelection bid.

This also has raised concerns about Hungary's ability to effectively hold the EU Council presidency in the second half of 2024, especially given Germany's concerns over alleged rule-of-law violations and Hungary's stance on the Ukraine war.⁷ Despite criticisms, Hungary is set to assume the EU presidency soon on July 1st. In the upcoming period, Hungary's relations with the EU are expected to be significantly affected. It is indicated that the EU plans to sideline Hungary from high-profile roles in the next European Commission due to Hungarian Prime

⁴ A. Biçer, EU Council's Michel criticizes European Commission chief von der Leyen over pro-Israel stance, Anadolu Agency, 05.06.2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/eu-councils-michel-criticizes-european-commission-chief-von-der-leyen-over-pro-israel-stance/3240285>

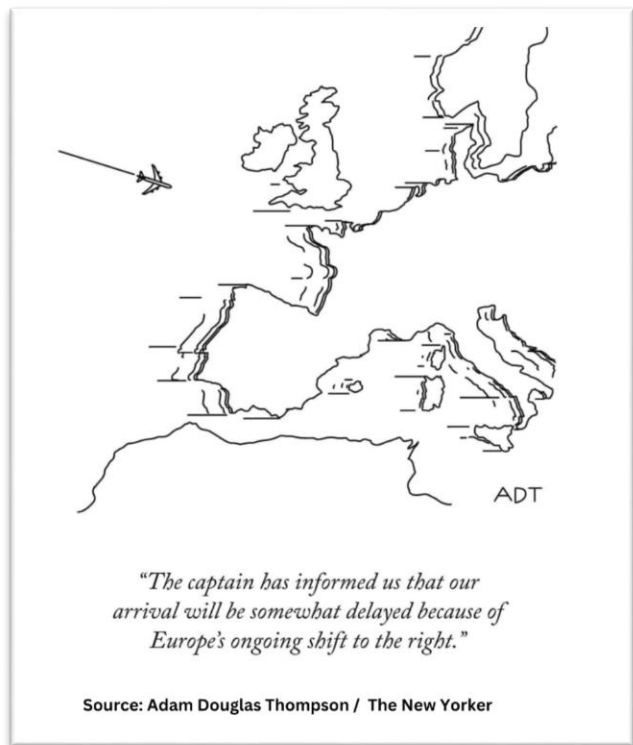
⁵ B. Moens, J. Barigazzi, Charles Michel wants to ban Ursula von der Leyen from top job talks, Politico, 11.06.2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-charles-michel-ban-ursula-von-der-leyen-top-job-commission-president-talks/>

⁶ J. Liboreiro, European Parliament sues Commission over the release of €10.2 billion in frozen funds to Hungary, Euronews, 14.03.2024, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/03/14/european-parliament-sues-commission-over-the-release-of-102-billion-in-frozen-funds-to-hun>

⁷ G. Sorgi, Germany questions Hungary's ability to hold EU's rotating presidency in 2024, Politico, 30.05.2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-hungary-viktor-orban-eu-presidency-democracy-backsliding/>

Minister Viktor Orbán's obstructionism regarding Ukraine.⁸ Consequently, the EU is unlikely to allow Hungary to retain influential positions, particularly the role of European Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement currently held by Olivér Várhelyi. Várhelyi, who has been in the role since 2019, has been criticized for undermining EU policies and creating confusion in diplomatic standoffs, such as with Georgia.

There was also significant discussion about the rise of right-wing and Eurosceptic sentiments, particularly in reaction to new projects launched during Von der Leyen's mandate, such as the European Green Deal, integration policies, and enlargement efforts. Hence, even before the EP elections, it was expected that the 2024 elections would witness a major shift to the right in many countries: Right-wing parties have gained support based on public perception that the EU's green transformation agenda is overly ambitious and that climate regulations are driving up inflation and the cost of living. Developments in recent years, such as the war in Ukraine, the rise of gas prices, farmer protests, debates on the green agenda, migration issues, and economic difficulties, have paved the way for the strengthening of right-wing parties, as anticipated in polls conducted in Member States. Post-election developments have confirmed these expectations, particularly in key EU countries like France and Germany.



What's Next?

One week after the elections, discussions are ongoing regarding the implications of these elections for EU politics and individual policy areas. Following the elections, pro-EU parties consolidated a commanding majority with over 64% of seats, primarily through a coalition of

⁸ G. Gavin, Hungary can kiss a top job in Brussels goodbye, Politico, 30.06.2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/viktor-orban-oliver-varhelyi-hungary-european-commission-ukraine-aid-sanctions-enlargement/>

centrist parties. This outcome positions them strongly for negotiating EU legislation in the next five years. With upcoming re-elections for both the Presidents of the European Council and the European Commission, along with Hungary's takeover of the final stint of the Trilateral Presidency for the next six months, 2024 becomes a significant period for the EU.

Despite the EPP winning the majority of seats, Ursula von der Leyen's bid for re-election as European Commission president still faces uncertainties. It is crucial to note the pivotal role of the European Parliament in the 2014 appointment of Jean-Claude Juncker through the *Spitzenkandidat* process, despite initial resistance from the European Council. This process allowed multiple candidates nominated by European political parties to compete, highlighting the Parliament's strengthened influence.

However, the *Spitzenkandidat* process faced significant challenges in 2019. Despite the EPP securing the most seats, the Council rejected Manfred Weber, the EPP's *Spitzenkandidat*, and instead opted for Ursula von der Leyen, who had not received formal endorsement from any political party prior to the election. This decision underscored the Council's continued authority and exposed divisions among member states and political parties regarding the legitimacy and effectiveness of the *Spitzenkandidat* process. Consequently, Member States have once again gained the upper hand in having a say in the election of the new Commission president.

Since winning the 2019 elections, Ursula von der Leyen has led the European Commission, supported by MEPs primarily from her center-right European People's Party (EPP), along with backing from Greens, Liberals, and Socialists. Her initial election saw her secure 383 votes, narrowly surpassing Juncker. However, both the Greens and Liberals each lost 20 MEPs each in the recent elections, potentially diminishing her support base. Additionally, Charles Michel's efforts to undermine her potential second term are likely to become more visible in the coming days, with alternative candidates like Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis being proposed.⁹ Nevertheless, the EPP's strong performance, expected to hold over a quarter of the parliament, could bolster Von der Leyen's prospects. However, her success hinges on securing an absolute majority in the European Parliament, where she faces dissent within her coalition and must navigate ideological divides, particularly with the Greens and the right-wing populist groups. Despite challenges, such as reduced support from centrist groups in the European Parliament and potential opposition from national leaders like Hungary's Viktor Orbán, Von

⁹ B. Moens, J. Barigazzi, Charles Michel's new plan to destroy von der Leyen: Give the Greek PM her job, Politico, 13.06.2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/charles-michel-new-plan-destroy-ursula-von-der-leyen-commission-president-kyriakos-mitsotakis/>

der Leyen was likely to be nominated by the European Council due to her position as the official candidate of the EPP for the European Commission presidency.¹⁰

However, on June 17, EU leaders met in Brussels but failed to agree on Ursula von der Leyen's reappointment for a second term as European Commission president. Despite assurances from France's President Emmanuel Macron and Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz that a deal was close, disagreements persisted among the leaders. The EPP, which won the European Parliament election, wanted to reappoint Von der Leyen as Commission president and Roberta Metsola as European Parliament president, both members of the EPP. They also proposed splitting the European Council presidency into two 2.5-year terms, with the EPP taking one term. This demand created friction with the S&D, who aimed to secure the Council presidency for Portugal's António Costa.¹¹

Macron and Scholz had both expressed optimism before the meeting, suggesting that an agreement on the top EU jobs could be reached swiftly. However, the lack of consensus means that EU leaders will have to reconvene on June 27-28 to continue their deliberations, aiming to finalize the leadership appointments before the European Parliament votes on the next Commission president in mid-July.

On the other hand, the race for the next EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy is heating up, with several prominent figures vying for the role as Josep Borrell prepares to step down. Key contenders include Kaja Kallas from Estonia, who is supported by French President Emmanuel Macron due to her alignment with his views on European defense; Sophie Wilmès from Belgium and Xavier Bettel from Luxembourg, who face skepticism regarding their diplomatic skills and previous EU leadership from some quarters; Radek Sikorski of Poland, viewed as a strong communicator but encountering political hurdles within the EPP; and Micheál Martin, the former Irish *Taoiseach* (prime minister), also under consideration, although Ireland's neutrality stance and domestic political dynamics may affect his candidacy. Who will ultimately shape the EU's foreign policy amid geopolitical tensions remains to be seen.

The outcome of the elections carries significant implications for the European Green Deal efforts as well, including the "Farm to Fork" strategy.¹² The Greens' losses, especially in major

¹⁰ Charles Grant, Zselyke Csaky, Christina Kessler, Zach Meyers and Luigi Scazzieri, *CER Insight: What Will the EU Election Results Mean for Europe?*, 11.06.2024, <https://www.cer.eu/insights/what-will-eu-election-results-mean-europe>

¹¹ B. Moens, J. Barigazzi, S. Lau, EU leaders fail to agree on von der Leyen's second term, 17.06.2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/leaders-fail-to-agree-on-von-der-leyens-second-term/>

¹² L. Kurnaz, AB Parlamentosu seçimlerinin "Tarladan Çatala" uygulamasına etkileri, T24, 14.06.2024, https://t24.com.tr/yazarlar/levent-kurnaz/ab-parlamentosu-secimlerinin-tarladan-catala-uygulamasina-etkileri,45232#google_vignette

economies like France and Germany, could complicate the strategy's implementation by reducing support for sustainable agricultural policies. The surge of far-right parties and their substantial gains in these elections suggests a potential shift away from prioritizing climate change and sustainability issues. Nevertheless, the continued influence of center-right parties such as the EPP provides some assurance that the Green Deal will not be entirely abandoned.

The electoral shift in the Parliament poses significant challenges to the EU's enlargement agenda, previously advocated by major political groups like the EPP and S&D. These groups viewed enlargement as geopolitically imperative, particularly in response to threats like Russian aggression. To sustain EU accession efforts in this altered political landscape, it is suggested that the next Commission President needs to explicitly prioritize enlargement alongside critical objectives such as defense and the green transition, emphasizing collaboration with the newly appointed commissioners for enlargement and defense.¹³

Secondly, the selection of a balanced and capable Commissioner for enlargement is essential. Given divergent member states' perspectives on accession, the appointed commissioner must adeptly navigate internal political dynamics within the European Council while upholding stringent rule-of-law conditions. Nevertheless, regardless of the leadership in these institutions, EU-Turkey relations are not expected to change. Interactions with third countries are likely to continue in a transactional manner. In Turkey, although the recent outcomes were seen as a pivotal moment concerning economic challenges, polarization, migration, and Islamophobia, the overall political direction of the EU has shown minimal alteration, with these effects being more pronounced at the national level.

Thirdly, there is an urgent need to secure robust budgetary support for enlargement. With the EU's long-term budget set to conclude in 2027, there is a pressing call to reform and enhance the Multiannual Financial Framework. The Parliament's role in approving funding allocations becomes pivotal, particularly given member states' reluctance to centralize funds or endorse tax hikes. Alternative funding mechanisms such as revenues from the travel authorization system, carbon border adjustments, and emissions trading are proposed as politically feasible alternatives. The rise of right-wing influences in the European Parliament could potentially hinder or redirect EU enlargement efforts. However, strategic leadership and robust policy frameworks remain critically important to sustain the EU's enlargement agenda amidst evolving political dynamics. Although the European Parliament may not be able to hasten enlargement, it can certainly put a brake on it.

¹³ E. Morina, Growing pains: The future of EU enlargement after the European Parliament election, European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 13.06.2024, <https://ecfr.eu/article/growing-pains-the-future-of-eu-enlargement-after-the-european-parliament-election/>