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## 2024 EP Elections under the Shadow of Rising Populism

Gilles Ivaldi, Emilia Zankina

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# 2024 EP ELECTIONS UNDER THE SHADOW OF RISING POPULISM

Edited by Gilles Ivaldi & Emilia Zankina

 **ECPS**  
EUROPEAN CENTER for  
POPULISM STUDIES









# 2024 EP ELECTIONS UNDER THE SHADOW OF RISING POPULISM





# 2024 EP ELECTIONS UNDER THE SHADOW OF RISING POPULISM

*A report by European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS)*

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## Introduction

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Throughout the first two decades of the 21st century, populism has emerged as one of the most significant global political phenomena, deeply affecting electoral politics in democracies across the globe, both new and consolidated (Moffit, 2017; De la Torre, 2019). In Europe, populism has become a major force, reshaping the political landscape and discourse of the European Union and most of its member states in unprecedented ways. Over the years, the impact of populist parties has been felt both at the level of domestic and European politics, increasingly putting pressure on more established mainstream parties, particularly at the right of the political spectrum (FEPS, 2024).

Populism is found in different locations in the party system, predominantly at the far left and far right of the spectrum (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018). The PopuList database of populist parties illustrates the rise in support for populist, far-left, and far-right parties in Europe since the early 1990s (see Figure 1). Such parties have made significant electoral gains in recent years. They have joined coalition governments in several countries, including Italy, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Austria, more generally reflecting the mainstreaming of their ideas and themes in party politics and public opinion (Muldoon & Herman, 2018; Schwörer, 2021; Bale & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2021).

“The editors would like to thank Christo Pretorius, Lara Greening, Beatrice Bottura and Andrea Guidotti at the ECPS for their support and assistance in preparing this report.”

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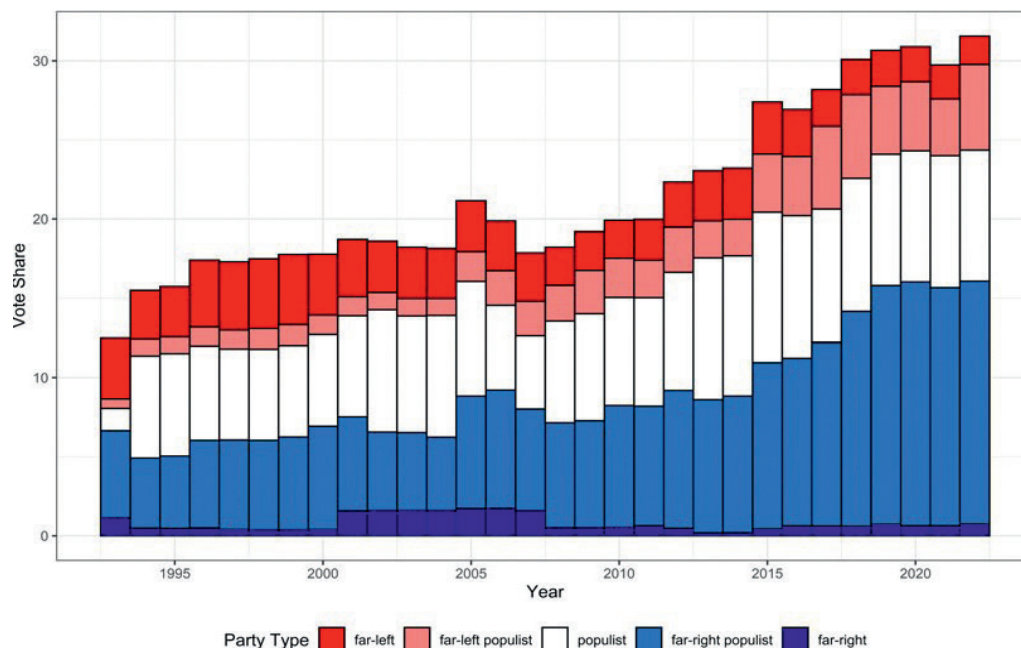
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Ivaldi, Gilles & Zankina, Emilia. (2024). “Introduction: The ECPS Project ‘Populism and the European Parliament Elections 2024’.” In: *2024 EP Elections under the Shadow of Rising Populism*. (eds). Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). October 22, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0060>



Figure 1. Electoral support for populist, far-left and far-right parties in Europe since the early 1990s



Source: Rooduijn, Pirro, Halikiopoulou, et al. (2023).

Populist performances typically vary across parties and contexts, reflecting the complex interplay between structural and contextual factors. As Kriesi and Schulte-Cloos (2020) show, electoral support for radical parties is rooted in structural factors, but their translation into electoral choice is conditioned by political discontent that originates in specific political dynamics. While contemporary populism is generally seen as a response to a wide range of socioeconomic and cultural grievances and issues (Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Guriev & Papaioannou, 2020; Rodrik, 2021), it can also be seen as an expression of political discontent largely dependent on the national political cycle and the shorter-term country-specific opportunities produced for populist mobilization.

The analysis of the European Parliament elections of June 2024 thus provides a unique opportunity to simultaneously assess the current wave of populism across all 27 European Union (EU) member states. With European Parliament (EP) elections all taking place at about the same time, we can look more closely and comparatively at the current wave of pan-European populism, its size, dynamics and impact on national polities and, ultimately, on the EU.

This report analyzes the performances and impact of populist parties in the 2024 European elections. Drawing from the analyses of country experts, we provide an account of how populist parties across the spectrum performed in each of the



EU's 27 member states, looking at the campaign, issues and demand for populist politics in each country separately and the challenges that populist party success more broadly bears for the future of the EU.

In this introductory chapter, we briefly define populism, provide a topographic map of populist parties across all EU member states ahead of the 2024 European elections, and review the main drivers of populism identified in the literature. We then turn more specifically to the general context and outcome of the 2024 EP election, assessing the hypothesis of another 'populist wave' while also looking back at the 2019 election to compare populist party success over time.

## Mapping European populism(s)

Mudde (2004) defines populism as a 'thin-centered ideology' that 'considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite", and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people'. Populist parties champion the cause of the 'common man' against what is perceived as a detached and self-serving political elite. While there are other ontological approaches to populism – e.g., political discourse (Laclau, 2005), political strategy (Weyland, 2001), and performance (Ostiguy et al., 2020) – these different traditions of research generally converge towards the same common essential attributes underpinning populism (Olivas Osuna, 2021). Moreover, the ideational approach allows one to connect the supply and demand side of populism and to study the diversity of its manifestations across Europe.

In the European political landscape, populism manifests itself in a variety of parties across the political spectrum, from left to right (Ivaldi et al., 2017; Taggart & Pirro, 2021). In Eastern and Central Europe, populism may also be found across a range of 'centrist' anti-establishment parties located inside and outside the mainstream (Hanley & Sikk, 2016). Such diversity is shown in Table 1, which provides an overview of the leading populist parties in the current European political landscape.

Table 1. List of populist parties considered in the report

Country	Type	Party name	Party abbreviation	% most recent general election	Date most recent general election
<b>Austria</b>	Radical Right	Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs	FPÖ	16.2	Sept 2019
<b>Belgium</b>	Left	Parti du Travail de Belgique-Partij van de arbeid	PTB–PVDA	8.6	May 2019
<b>Belgium</b>	Radical Right	Vlaams Belang	VB	11.9	May 2019
<b>Bulgaria</b>	Centrist	Graždani za evropejsko razvitie na Bălgarija	GERB	26.49	Apr 2023
<b>Bulgaria</b>	Centrist	Ima takav narod	ITN	4.11	Apr 2023
<b>Bulgaria</b>	Centrist	Bulgarski vuzkhod	BV	3.06	Apr 2023
<b>Bulgaria</b>	Centrist	Prodalzhavame Promjanata-Democraticzna Bulgaria	PP–BD	24.56	Apr 2023
<b>Bulgaria</b>	Extreme Right	Vazrazhdane	Vazrazhdane	14.16	Apr 2023
<b>Croatia</b>	National conservative Right	Domovinski pokret	DP	9.56	Apr 2024
<b>Croatia</b>	Extreme Right	Pravo i Pravda	PiP		
<b>Cyprus</b>	Extreme Right	Ethniko Laiko Metopo	ELAM	6.78	May 2021
<b>Czech Republic</b>	Centrist	Akce nespokojených občanů	ANO 2011	27.13	Oct 2021
<b>Czech Republic</b>	Centrist	Přísaha	P	4.68	Oct 2021
<b>Czech Republic</b>	Radical Right	Svoboda a přímá demokracie	SPD	9.56	Oct 2021
<b>Czech Republic</b>	Radical Right	Právo Respekt Odbornost	PRO	–	–
<b>Czech Republic</b>	Radical Right	Trikolóra hnutí občanů	Trikolóra	2.76	Oct 2021
<b>Czech Republic</b>	Radical Right	Přísaha a Motoristé	Přísaha a Motoristé	–	–
<b>Denmark</b>	Left	Enhedslisten – De Rød-Grønne	Enhl., Ø	5.13	Nov 2022
<b>Denmark</b>	Radical Right	Dansk Folkeparti	DF	2.64	Nov 2022
<b>Denmark</b>	Radical Right	Nye Borgerlige	NB	3.67	Nov 2022
<b>Denmark</b>	Radical Right	Danmarksdemokraterne	DD	8.12	Nov 2022
<b>Estonia</b>	Radical Right	Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond	EKRE	16.0	Mar 2023
<b>Finland</b>	Radical Right	Perussuomalaiset/Finns	PS/Finns Party	20.1	Apr 2023
<b>France</b>	Left	La France Insoumise	LFI	13.82	Jun 2022
<b>France</b>	Radical Right	Rassemblement national	RN	18.7	Jun 2022
<b>France</b>	Radical Right	Reconquête!	REC	4.3	Jun 2022
<b>France</b>	Radical Right	Debout la France	DLF	0.54	Jun 2022
<b>Germany</b>	Left	Die Linke	Die Linke	4.89	Sep 2021
<b>Germany</b>	Left	Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht	BSW	–	Sep 2021



<b>Germany</b>	Radical Right	Alternative für Deutschland	AfD	10.34	Sep 2021
<b>Greece</b>	Extreme Right	Spartiátes	Spartiátes	4.64	Jun 2023
<b>Greece</b>	Left	Synaspismós Rizospastikís Aristerás	SYRIZA	17.84	Jun 2023
<b>Greece</b>	Left	Plefsi Eleftherias	PE	3.17	Jun 2023
<b>Greece</b>	Left	Kommounistiko Komma Elladas	KKE	7.69	Jun 2023
<b>Greece</b>	Radical Right	Elliniki Lysi	EL	4.44	Jun 2023
<b>Greece</b>	Radical Right	Dimokratikó Patriotikó Kínima	NIKI	3.69	Jun 2023
<b>Greece</b>	Radical Right	Foni Logikis	FL	0.43	Jun 2023
<b>Hungary</b>	Extreme Right	Mi Hazánk Mozgalom	MHM	5.88	Apr 2022
<b>Hungary</b>	Radical Right	Fidesz-Magyar Polgári Szövetség	Fidesz	49.3	Apr 2022
<b>Ireland</b>	Extreme Right	Ireland First	IF	–	–
<b>Ireland</b>	Left	Aontú (Unity)	Aontú	–	–
<b>Ireland</b>	Left	Independents4Change	IC4	–	–
<b>Ireland</b>	Centrist	Independent Ireland	Independent Ireland	–	–
<b>Ireland</b>	Radical Right	Irish Freedom Party	IFP	–	–
<b>Ireland</b>	Extreme Right	National Party	NP	–	–
<b>Ireland</b>	Left	Sinn Féin	SF	24.5	Feb 2020
<b>Ireland</b>	Extreme Left	People before Profit	PBP-Solidarity	2.6	Feb 2020
<b>Italy</b>	Left	Movimento 5 Stelle	M5S	15.4	Sep 2022
<b>Italy</b>	Radical Right	Lega	Lega	8.8	Sep 2022
<b>Italy</b>	Radical Right	Fratelli d'Italia	FdI	26	Sep 2022
<b>Italy</b>	Right	Forza Italia	FI	8.1	Sep 2022
<b>Latvia</b>	Centrist	Stabilitātei!	S!	6.8	Oct 2022
<b>Latvia</b>	Radical Right	Latvija pirmajā vietā	LPV	6.3	Oct 2022
<b>Latvia</b>	Radical Right	Suverēnā vara	SV	3.3	Oct 2022
<b>Latvia</b>	Radical Right	Katram un katrai	KuK-Platform21	3.72	Oct 2022
<b>Latvia</b>	Right	Apvienība Jaunlatvieši	AJ	–	–
<b>Latvia</b>	Right	Tautas Varas Spēks (Power and Strength of the Nation)	TVS	1.13	Oct 2022
<b>Latvia</b>	Right	Tauta, Zeme, Valstiskums (Nation, Land, Statehood)	TZV	–	–
<b>Latvia</b>	Right	Centra partija (Centre Party)	CP	–	–
<b>Lithuania</b>	Centrist	Darbo Partija	DP	9.77	Oct 2020
<b>Lithuania</b>	Radical Right	Tautos ir teisingumo sąjunga (The People and Justice Union)	TTS	–	–

<b>Lithuania</b>	Radical Right	Nacionalinis susivienijimas (The National Alliance)	NS	2.21	Oct 2020
<b>Lithuania</b>	Radical Right	Krikščionių sąjunga (Christian Union)	KS	–	–
<b>Luxembourg</b>	Right	Alternativ Demokratesch Reformpartei (Alternative Democratic Reform Party)	ADR	9.3	Oct 2023
<b>Netherlands</b>	Centrist	BoerBurgerBeweging	BBB	4.65	Nov 2023
<b>Netherlands</b>	Left	Socialistische Partij	SP	3.15	Nov 2023
<b>Netherlands</b>	Radical Right	Partij voor de Vrijheid	PVV	23.49	Nov 2023
<b>Netherlands</b>	Radical Right	Forum voor Democratie	FvD BAUDET	2.23	Nov 2023
<b>Netherlands</b>	Radical Right	Juiste Antwoord 2021	JA21	0.68	Nov 2023
<b>Poland</b>	Extreme Right	Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość	Konf	1.6	Oct 2023
<b>Poland</b>	Extreme Right	Nowa Nadzieja	Nowa Nadzieja	2.6	Oct 2023
<b>Poland</b>	Extreme Right	Ruch Narodowy	Ruch Narodowy	0.9	Oct 2023
<b>Poland</b>	Radical Right	Prawo i Sprawiedliwość	PiS	35.4	Oct 2023
<b>Portugal</b>	Radical Right	Chega	Chega	18.06	Mar 2024
<b>Portugal</b>	Radical Right	Alternativa Democrática Nacional (National Democratic Alternative)	ADN	1.6	Mar 2024
<b>Romania</b>	Radical Right	Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor	AUR	9.2	Dec 2020
<b>Romania</b>	Radical Right	S.O.S. România	SOS RO	–	–
<b>Slovakia</b>	Centrist	Hnutie Slovensko	Hnutie Slovensko	8.9	Sep 2023
<b>Slovakia</b>	Extreme Right	Ľudová strana – Naše Slovensko, ĽSNS	KOTLEBA–ĽSNS	0.84	Sep 2023
<b>Slovakia</b>	Extreme Right	Hnutie Republika	Hnutie Republika	4.8	Sep 2023
<b>Slovakia</b>	Left	SMER – sociálna demokracia	SMER–SD	22.95	Sep 2023
<b>Slovakia</b>	Radical Right	Slovenská národná strana	SNS	5.63	Sep 2023
<b>Slovakia</b>	Radical Right	VLASTĚ	VLASTĚ	–	–
<b>Slovakia</b>	Radical Right	Sme Rodina	Sme Rodina	2.21	Sep 2023
<b>Slovenia</b>	Centrist	Dobra država	DD	1.7	Apr 2022
<b>Slovenia</b>	Left	Koalicija Združena levica	Levica	4.46	Apr 2022
<b>Slovenia</b>	Radical Right	Slovenska Nacionalna Stranka	SNS	1.49	Apr 2022
<b>Slovenia</b>	Radical Right	Slovenska demokratska stranka	SDS	23.48	Apr 2022
<b>Spain*</b>	Left	Podemos	Podemos	–	–
<b>Spain*</b>	Radical Right	Vox	Vox	12.4	Jul 2023
<b>Spain*</b>	Radical Right	Se Acabó La Fiesta	SALF	–	–
<b>Sweden</b>	Radical Right	Sverigedemokraterna	SD	20.5	Sep 2022

Source: Compiled by the authors. Notes: 1) No data (-) indicates that the party did not participate in the most recent national election; 2) blue indicates radical-right populist; pink radical-left populist; and white, centrist populist. \* Parties that are associated with a populist discourse.



Table 1 illustrates the diversity of populism. Overall, there were about 90 populist parties across all EU member states on the eve of the 2024 European election, with varying ideological profiles, backgrounds and electoral sizes. Essentially, populism was found both left and right of the European political spectrum, as well as at its centre, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).

On the radical right, populism is typically combined with exclusionary nativism and authoritarianism, whereby the people and the elite are primarily defined along cultural lines (Mudde, 2007). Radical-right populist parties essentialize migration not only in their nativist rhetoric but also portray it with terrorism and crime, and in this way, it is put forward as a security issue, as was the case during the Paris and Brussels attacks in 2015–2016 (Mudde, 2019). Such populism is found in parties like France’s National Rally (RN), Lega (formerly Lega Nord) and Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d’Italia, FdI) in Italy, and the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ). The nativist and authoritarian ideology of the PRR is also found in ‘radicalized’ conservative parties such as Poland’s Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) and Hungary’s Fidesz, which have turned to a populist radical right strategy over time (Bušíková, 2017: 575).

The populist radical left has, on the other hand, a universalistic profile embracing a more socially inclusive notion of the people, who are essentially pitted against the economic elites (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018; Lisi et al., 2019). In Europe, left-wing populism has been particularly electorally successful in the wake of the 2008 global economic crisis (Katsambekis & Kioupkiolis, 2020). Economic issues, bailouts, and austerity programs were the main driving forces behind a transformation of the radical left emphasizing distributive issues in Eurosceptic populist directions (Gómez-Reino Cachafeiro & Plaza-Colodro, 2018). Parties such as the Spanish Podemos, SYRIZA in Greece, or Germany’s Die Linke (The Left) are examples of this phenomenon. In those countries, however, there has been a decline in the electoral support for parties of the populist left since 2019 (Ivaldi, 2020).

Finally, in CEE, populism often manifests itself in the form of ‘centrist’ anti-establishment parties (Učeň, 2007; Hanley & Sikk, 2016). Such parties operate in the more volatile party system of the former Communist bloc, where political instability is a long-term phenomenon. They focus on challenging the existing political elite and fighting corruption, and they can be found across the entire political spectrum, both within and outside the ideological mainstream (Engler et al., 2019). This type of populism is found in parties such as Slovakia’s Ordinary

People and Independents (OLaNO), the movement of Paweł Kukiz (Kukiz) in Poland and Change Continues (Prodalzhavame Promyanata, PP) in Bulgaria. Looking more specifically at the Czech Republic, Havlík (2019) sees the rise of the Action of Dissatisfied Citizens 2011 (ANO 2011) as a case of ‘centrist technocratic populism’ based on a denial of political pluralism, anti-partyism, resistance to constitutionalism and the embrace of majoritarianism. In Western Europe, the Italian M5S has been seen as a case of ‘centrist populism’, which does not display the typical ideological profile (Mosca & Tronconi, 2019; Pirro & Van Kessel, 2018).

## The populism-Euroscepticism nexus

Given their inherent anti-elite and anti-established stance, populist parties in the European context are also often Eurosceptic. Kneuer (2018) emphasizes such a ‘tandem’ of populism and Euroscepticism as one unifying feature of all successful populist parties in Europe, reflecting in her view the formation of a new transnational cleavage cross-cutting the traditional left-right axis.

A recent study examining parties in 30 European countries from 2018 to 2024 (Szczerbiak & Taggart 2024) finds 77 parties to be both Eurosceptic and anti-establishment. Szczerbiak and Taggart argue that the growth of European integration and its association with a series of crises, such as migration, the Eurozone, Brexit and COVID-19, has bred discontent that fostered anti-establishment positions and the demonization of the EU. At the same time, the study found clusters of parties that are anti-establishment but not Eurosceptic and parties that are Eurosceptic but not anti-establishment, arguing that the link is not always straightforward.

Meijers and Zaslove (2021) also examine populist parties’ positions towards European integration, similarly arguing for a nuanced picture, with some populist parties rejecting the EU outright while others are taking a reformist position. According to their study, populist parties such as the Dutch Freedom Party (PVV) and Forum for Democracy (FvD), the Alternative for Germany (AfD), Golden Dawn in Greece and Lega in Italy are highly Eurosceptic. Populist left parties, on the other hand, tend to be more moderate, with the Five Star Movement (M5S) being moderately Eurosceptic and Podemos and SYRIZA having moderate pro-EU positions.

Similarly, Pirro, Taggart and Kessel (2018) find differences between left- and right-wing variants of populist Euroscepticism. Examining the economic and



financial crisis (the ‘Great Recession’), the migrant crisis and Brexit, they find left-wing populists attacking the EU’s ‘neoliberal’ agenda and austerity measures, while right-wing populists criticizing the EU on account of increased immigration and multiculturalism. Brexit, on the other hand, is portrayed ‘by various kinds of populist parties as a victory for the ordinary people against unresponsive elites and a rejection of the undemocratic and technocratic decision-making process at the EU level’ (Pirro, Taggart and Van Kessel, 2018). While Euroscepticism is not limited to populist parties alone, neither are all populist parties Eurosceptic. We see a strong correlation between anti-EU positions and populist parties, which is more pronounced to the right than to the left.

More recently, however, there has been a moderating shift in populist Eurosceptic politics both left and right of the spectrum. In the wake of the Brexit referendum of 2016, many populist parties have strategically abandoned their previous plans to drop the Euro or leave the EU altogether, turning to more nuanced or ambiguous positions vis-à-vis European integration in order to increase their appeal to moderate and pro-EU voters, and to collaborate with mainstream parties. As Van Kessel et al. (2020) note, the difficulties in the Brexit process may have dampened public demand for leaving the EU elsewhere in Europe, thus reducing the viability of ‘exit strategies’. Other studies suggest that populist parties, particularly of the radical right, have been shying away from hard Eurosceptic positions. Right-wing nationalist populist parties have adopted ‘alt-Europe’ counternarratives reflecting ‘a conservative, xenophobic intergovernmental vision of a European “community of sovereign states”, “strong nations” or “fatherlands”, that abhors the EU’s “centralized” United States of Europe’ (McMahon, 2021: 10). ‘Taking back control from Brussels’ has been observed to be a common stand of radical right-wing populist parties on the way to the 2024 EP elections (Braun & Reinl, 2023).

As McDonnell and Werner (2018) argue, populist radical right parties ‘remain flexible to perform significant shifts’ on the issue of European integration because of its relatively limited salience. The dampening of their Euroscepticism by populist parties may also be associated with office-seeking strategies. As Ivaldi (2018b) suggests, in the case of the French FN, governmental credibility and coalition potential have been two strong incentives for the FN to tone down its Euroscepticism since the 2017 presidential election.

## Drivers of populism: structural and short-term factors

The economic crises of the past decade, coupled with the perceived threats posed by globalization and immigration, have created circumstances that allow for a surge in populist sentiments across various European nations. Populism, characterized by a general distrust towards traditional political institutions and an increasing polarization of society, is fuelled by a complex interplay of socioeconomic, cultural and political factors (Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Guriev & Papaioannou, 2020; Rodrik, 2021).

Different varieties of populism operate on different types of grievances and issues across the economic and cultural dimensions of electoral competition, however. Socioeconomic issues have traditionally been identified as critical factors of left-wing populism at both the party and the voter level (Charalambous & Ioannou, 2019) and have become increasingly relevant for right-wing populist parties since the 2008 financial crisis (Ibsen, 2019; Guriev & Papaioannou, 2020; Rodrik, 2021). Immigration has long been identified by research as a critical issue for populist radical right parties, and it is typically associated with authoritarian views of society (Mudde, 2007).

While sharing similar populist attitudes, populist voters diverge when it comes to the host ideologies to which their populism is attached (Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2018). Populist radical right voters are primarily concerned with cultural issues of immigration and law and order and show stronger nativist and authoritarian attitudes. Voters on the populist radical left tend to embrace more egalitarian and universalistic values while often supporting a libertarian agenda on social issues. Finally, centrist populist voters exhibit strong anti-establishment attitudes and are primarily characterized by protest voting but do not generally show the nationalist attitudes found in right-wing populism (Ivaldi, 2020; 2021). Such parties in CEE often take an anticorruption stance, making this the focus of their electoral appeal (Haughton, Neudorfer & Zankina, 2024).

As Kriesi and Schulte-Cloos (2020) demonstrated, the effect of these different sets of long-term, structural determinants is also conditioned by short-term political discontent, most notably when populist parties are in opposition. Such short-term





factors are particularly relevant to studying populism in European elections. EP elections are generally considered ‘second-order elections’ (Reif & Schmitt, 1980). That is, citizens give more weight to national elections than European ones on a range of different variables: political trust, interest in politics, attachment and complexity of politics. In European elections: (a) voters tend to trust national institutions instead of European ones; (b) they have a stronger connection to their own nation rather than the EU, and; (c) they think that European politics is too difficult to grasp and that domestic issues are more compelling than European ones (Braun, 2021).

Looking at party-level data from all European elections between 1979 and 2019, Ehin and Talving (2021) find that the second-order election model continues to wield significant explanatory power, with lower participation rates in EP elections compared with first-order national elections and incumbency being associated with electoral losses in most EP election years.

Because of the increasing politicization of European integration, however, the viability of the second-order election model has been called into question, reflecting the growing salience and resonance of EU-related issues in mass politics and party competition (Hutter et al., 2016). The recent analysis of EU issue voting in the 2019 EP election by Goldberg et al. (2024) concludes that such issues matter for all EP political groups under scrutiny (both mainstream and more radical), which speaks against the idea of conditional mobilization by Eurosceptic parties.

Moreover, while Ehin and Talving (2021) see the ‘second-order type as constituting a base for a fragmented parliament with a strong representation of populist and extremist parties, other studies, such as Wondreys (2023), find only limited evidence for a boost in electoral support for extreme parties in European elections. This finding is particularly salient when considering the size of those parties and their changing role and status in European party systems. As Wondreys (2023: 7) argues: ‘[G]iven the overall increase in size, the role of many extreme parties in their respective party systems may have changed.... Voters already vote for these parties in [first-order elections], and thus have fewer incentives to subsequently vote for them in [second-order elections] as well’.

At the same time, several European countries held elections at multiple levels concurrently from 7–9 June 2024. These included Belgium, which held federal elections alongside European Parliament elections; Bulgaria, which held another early national parliamentary election on the same date as the EP one; and several

countries that held local elections alongside the European ones (i.e., Cyprus, Hungary, Italy, Ireland, Malta and Romania). In these cases, we can expect to see European issues merge, rendered secondary or disappear altogether as domestic issues take precedence.

## Looking back at the 2019 EP elections

The 2019 EP elections took place in the wake of the migration crisis shaped by an unprecedented refugee flow to European countries, mainly from the Middle East and Africa, which peaked in 2014–2016. The crisis fed into the populist parties' Eurosceptic, nativist and nationalist narratives, which were even embraced by mainstream parties (Mudde 2019; Capozzi et al., 2023; Rodi et al., 2023). With the associated cultural sensitivities and economic, social and demographic concerns, European public interest has always been high in the political discourses on migration. In this sense, how the EU managed the refugee influx stood at the heart of discussions between 2015 and 2019. In parallel with Eurosceptic and populist concerns around European integration and migration, the economic agenda remained prominent during the 2019 EP election (Braun & Schafer, 2022). Finally, Brexit remained an important issue, serving as a benchmark of evaluation for citizens to reflect on the benefits of European membership to their own countries (Hobolt et al., 2022). In this regard, debates on the legitimacy of supranational governance, as heightened in the framework of sovereignty, were the most exploited narrative by populists against the EU (Ruzza and Pejovic 2019).

However, the predicted surge in support for populism did not fully materialize in the 2019 EP elections (Ivaldi, 2020). Despite a slowdown of economic activity, the economic context was somewhat less favourable to populist mobilization, as unemployment and inflation remained relatively low across much of Europe. Meanwhile, the impact of the EU migration crisis that had fuelled support for right-wing nationalist populists seemed to wane: economic issues dominated the 2019 European election agenda, together with climate change and promoting human rights and democracy, while immigration ranked fifth (European Parliament, 2019).

Moreover, in a context of high political uncertainty, polls showed more substantial support for the EU across member states. In the Spring 2019 Eurobarometer survey, 61% of EU citizens said that EU membership was good for their country, a figure at its highest since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 (Eurobarometer, 2019). Meanwhile, interest in the election was much higher than



in 2014, and voter turnout increased in 20 of the then-28 EU member states, most substantially in countries such as Poland (+22 percentage points), Romania (+19), Spain (+17), Austria (+15), and Hungary (+14).

In the 2019 elections, the centre-right European People's Party (EPP) and centre-left Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) lost their majority for the first time since 1979, securing 182 and 154 seats, respectively. A significant number of voters dissatisfied with Europe's ruling grand coalition turned to the Greens and Liberals. The Greens won a total of 74 seats, making significant gains in Western European countries such as Germany, France, Ireland and the UK. Pro-EU liberals secured 108 seats, which made Renew Europe the third largest group in the European Parliament.

Meanwhile, populist parties rose to a total of 241 seats, representing about a third (32%) of all 751 seats in the European Parliament at the time, as opposed to 211 seats (28%) five years earlier. However, the election showed mixed performances for populist party families across EU member states.

The outcome essentially confirmed the electoral consolidation of the populist right: together, these parties won 168 seats in 2019 – their best result ever – compared with 131 seats five years earlier. Support for right-wing populist parties significantly rose in Italy, Germany, Spain, Estonia, Sweden and Belgium and they dominated the polls in countries such as France, Italy and the UK. In Italy, Matteo Salvini's Lega was the big election winner, with 34.3% of the vote compared with only 6.2% in 2014. The National Rally (RN, formerly Front National) topped the polls in France with 23.3% of the vote. In the UK, Nigel Farage's Brexit Party made an impressive breakthrough with 30.5% of the vote, taking over as the main Eurosceptic outfit, a role formerly held by the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP).

In Eastern Europe, ruling conservative parties consolidated electorally: in Poland, Law and Justice (PiS) won 45.4% of the vote, increasing its previous support by 13.6%; in Hungary, Viktor Orbán's Fidesz dominated the polls with no less than 52.6%. Smaller, extreme right-wing parties also made gains in Greece and Slovakia. In Greece, Golden Dawn retained two of its previous four seats. In Slovakia, the neo-nazi People's Party Our Slovakia (ĽSNS), headed by Marian Kotleba, won 12.2% of the vote and two seats. In Cyprus, the National Popular Front (ELAM) increased its support to 8.3% (+5.6 percentage points) but failed to secure one of the island's six seats in the European Parliament.

In contrast, there was a significant drop in support for the populist left, from 43 seats in 2014 to 37 in the 2019 election. Left-wing populist parties had made substantial gains in the wake of the 2008 Great Recession, particularly in countries such as Greece and Spain, hit hardest by austerity policies (see Kriesi & Pappas, 2015: 23). In the 2014 elections, the populist radical left surged in Greece, Spain and Ireland and such parties made significant inroads in Portugal, Italy and France (Hernández & Kriesi, 2016). In 2019, against the backdrop of a timid economic recovery and lower unemployment, these parties lost ground across most EU member states, most notably in countries like Greece, Spain and France. In Eastern and Central Europe, the populist left remained relatively marginal electorally.

Finally, in 2019, centrist populist parties secured 32 of their previous 33 seats. Centrist populists lost momentum in countries of the former Communist bloc, such as Latvia, where Who Owns the State? (KPV) collapsed to less than 1% of the vote, as opposed to their 14.3% showing in the 2018 national elections. In Estonia, the Estonian Centre Party (EK) fell by 8.6%. In the Czech Republic, the governing ANO and its highly controversial leader, Andrej Babiš, took just 21.2% of the vote, down 8.4 percentage points from its previous result. In Bulgaria, electoral support for the ruling GERB fell by 2 percentage points, although Boiko Borissov's party remained the most potent force in Bulgarian politics with 30.9% of the European election vote. Centrist populist parties also performed badly in Slovakia, Poland, Lithuania and Croatia. In Western Europe, the Five Star Movement (M5S) was the biggest loser of the 2019 Italian EP election, losing 15.6% compared to the 2018 national election.

With a specific reference to Euroscepticism, the 2019 elections were a real success. In almost all member states, except Luxembourg, Malta, Slovenia and Romania, anti-EU movements won seats. The 2019 elections formed a parliament where more than 28% of MEPs belonged to populist or Eurosceptic parties (Treib, 2021: 177).

## The context of the 2024 EP elections

The 2024 EP elections were held in a context characterized by the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic, concerns about the EU's handling of migration and refugee issues, the deteriorating economic situation and inflation crisis in member countries, security challenges posed by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the newly erupted Israeli–Hammas war in the Middle East.

The EU faced unprecedented challenges due to the COVID-19 crisis and is still





dealing with its economic and social consequences. It adopted a €750 billion recovery fund called NextGenerationEU to support member states' recovery efforts. However, the implementation of this fund was delayed by political disputes and legal challenges, potentially fuelling political discontent – an issue that also carried onto the 2024 EP elections.

Concerning migration and asylum policy reform, the EU has been struggling to find a common approach to address the influx of migrants and asylum seekers, especially from Africa and the Middle East. The current system, based on the Dublin Regulation, has been criticized for putting too much pressure on the frontline states, such as Greece, Italy and Spain and for failing to ensure solidarity and responsibility-sharing among member states. To address this, the European Commission proposed a new pact on migration and asylum to create a more balanced and comprehensive framework for managing migration flows (European Commission, 2024). The proposal took a long time to go through the necessary legislative process due to the opposition from some member states, such as Hungary, Poland and Austria, who rejected mandatory relocation quotas and favoured stricter border controls.

Challenges were not limited to domestic issues; the Russian invasion of Ukraine was a litmus test for the common foreign and security policy of the Union. The EU was confronted with a deteriorating security situation in Eastern Europe as Russia intensified its military aggression against Ukraine and threatened to cut off gas supplies to Europe. The EU imposed sanctions on Russia, but disagreement elicited among the member states on the extent of support and related issues like grain imports from Ukraine. The ECPS report on the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on populism in Europe concluded that populist radical right parties exploited the war as an opportunity to voice their anti-EU rhetoric with sovereigntist arguments. In this vein, their common stance towards the sanctions had been hesitancy and scepticism, illustrating them as not really in line with economic and security-related national interests (Ivaldi & Zankina, 2023).

Furthermore, the recent terrorist attack of Hamas on Israel and the subsequent outbreak of the Israel–Hamas war bore high risks not only for the Middle East but also for other parts of the world, including Europe. Considering the heavy historical and political baggage the Israeli-Palestinian conflict held, it seemed like a convenient

topic to be exploited by populist parties ahead of the elections. Instances such as the terrorist attack in Brussels, in which two Swedish citizens were killed in the days after the start of the war, provided room for populists' rhetoric in the form of xenophobia, Islamophobia and anti-migration.

However, this 'polycrisis' was expected to play out differently in each country. The survey by Krastev and Leonard (2024a), which was conducted in September and October 2023 in 11 European countries (Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and Switzerland), suggests that the crises of the economy, security, health, climate and migration, have created distinct political responses and opinions across Europe. While immigration was the key issue in Germany, France and Denmark, people in other European countries identified climate change as the most important crisis. Italians and Portuguese, in turn, pointed to global economic turmoil, while in Spain, Great Britain and Romania, the COVID-19 pandemic was the principal issue. Estonians, Poles and Danes considered the war in Ukraine to be the most serious of crises.

In such context, the 2024 European elections represented a crucial test for both the EU and national governments, as voters would evaluate their handling of the pandemic and the recovery and how they planned to address the long-term challenges of climate change, digital transformation, and social cohesion (Bassot, 2023).

However, public opinion data showed relatively positive views toward the Union among EU citizens. Trust in the EU has increased by 6 percentage points since 2019 and now stands at 49%. The perception of the situation of the European economy has improved since autumn 2023, with 47% of respondents rating it as 'good', the highest level since 2019. Nearly two-thirds (62%) also said they were optimistic about the future of the EU, which is a slight increase (+4 percentage points) compared to five years earlier. Feelings of being 'citizens of the EU' dominated for 74% of the respondents, the highest level in over two decades. Meanwhile, a majority of respondents said they were satisfied with the way democracy works in their country (58%) and in the EU (57%) (Eurobarometer, 2024).



## An anticipated rise in support for right-wing populists across the EU

Populist parties have gained traction in recent years, reflecting a broader trend of rising populism across the continent. This surge in popularity has been particularly noticeable among right-leaning populist parties (Ivaldi & Torner, 2023). Such rise in support has been exemplified by the Alternative für Deutschland's (AfD) triumph in regional elections in eastern states of Germany, the remarkable success of Le Pen's NR in the 2022 French elections, Giorgia Meloni's FdI breakthrough in the 2022 Italian election, as well as by the performances of the Sweden Democrats and Finns Party in the last parliamentary elections, which all point to a further increase in the representation of right-wing populist parties in the next EP. In Italy, Meloni's FdI and Salvini's Lega, respectively part of the ECR (European Conservatives and Reformists) and Identity and Democracy (ID), were also seen as potentially decisive actors in the alliance formation of the next European Parliament (Masseti, 2023; Maślanka, 2023).

Elsewhere in Europe, right-wing populist parties have become established in countries like Portugal and Spain, and they have topped the polls in Austria and Belgium. In CEE, right-wing populism has been on the rise in Estonia, Croatia, Romania and Bulgaria. In Hungary, Orbán's Fidesz secured another term in government in the 2022 elections with a clear victory, putting the contested topics between the party and the EU, like the supremacy of the rule of law, immigration, the Russia–Ukraine War, on the agenda of the EP elections. Moreover, Fidez's suspension by the EPP and then its departure from this political group has led the party to search for new coalitions after the elections, with talks of joining the ECR group. In Poland, the October 2023 national elections resulted in the opposition parties' coalition winning over the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) and the new government of pro-EU Prime Minister Donald Tusk. While such an outcome will undoubtedly improve relations between Poland and the EU, PiS has maintained its support at around 30% of the vote, together with Confederation, a heterogeneous extremist group at about 10% of the vote.

Analysts predicted 'a major shift to the right in many countries, with populist radical right parties gaining votes and seats across the EU and centre-left and green parties losing votes and seats' (Krastev & Leonard, 2024b). Anti-European populists were expected 'to top the polls in nine member states (Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, France, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, and Slovakia) and come

second or third in a further nine countries (Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and Sweden)’ (Ibid.)

## The European Parliament and party groups

While reflecting the existing balance of strength across national contexts, populist party performances at the EU level may significantly impact the configuration of party groups within the EP, which is a key legislative body of the EU, working alongside the Council of the European Union to adopt European legislation following proposals by the European Commission. The EP comprises 705 members (MEPs) – 720 in the new EP – making it the second-largest democratic electorate in the world. These MEPs are elected every five years by the citizens of the EU through universal suffrage.

The structure and operation of the EP are governed by its Rules of Procedure, and the political bodies, committees, delegations and political groups guide EP activities. The representation of citizens is ‘degressively proportional’, with a minimum threshold of six members per member state and no member state having more than 96 seats. Degressive proportionality means that while seats are allocated based on the population of the member states, more populous member states agree to be under-represented to favour greater representation of less populated ones.

Political groups within the EP can be formed around a single European political party or can include more than one European party as well as national parties and independents. Prior to the 2024 EP elections, the existing political groups in the EP were the EPP, the Progressive Alliance of S&D, Renew Europe (previously ALDE), the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA), ECR, The Left in the EP (GUE/NGL), and ID.

The outgoing EP was home to both left-wing and right-wing populist parties, that is, while Brothers of Italy (FdI), Vox of Spain, Sweden Democrats, Fidesz of Hungary, Law and Justice (PiS) of Poland, the Finns Party (Perussuomalaiset), the AfD, the National Rally of France, stood on the right side of the spectrum, Podemos of Spain and SYRIZA of Greece represented left-wing populism in the 2019–2024 EP. Regarding political group membership, right-wing populist parties tend to choose different political groups, preventing them from having a common voice in the EP. After the 2019 elections, however, their seeking of collaboration has become more evident, especially under the umbrella of ID and ECR.



## Questions addressed in the report

Under the auspices of the European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS), this report examines the electoral performances and impacts of populist parties in the 2024 European elections. Based on a compilation of country-specific analyses by local experts, the report looks at populist party performances across all EU member states, and it discusses the challenges of populist politics for European institutions as well as for the future of Europe.

Each chapter provides background information about the main populist forces in the country of focus by examining their history, electoral support and political agenda. This includes populist parties across the spectrum where deemed relevant. With a focus on the 2024 European election, each country chapter looks at the ‘supply side’ of populism (i.e., the positions of populist parties towards the EU in general and vis-à-vis specific policies, such as migration and asylum, fiscal policy, the Schengen system, European citizenship and democracy, the COVID-19 pandemic, human rights, as well as external affairs, including policy towards the Russia–Ukraine and Israel– Hamas conflicts). Country analyses ask how populists used Euroscepticism, national sovereignty, ethnic culture, identity, xenophobia and religion during the 2024 EP election campaign and what their discourse was on the composition and working mechanisms of the European Parliament.

Additionally, each chapter examines the ‘demand side’ of populism by looking at how populist parties fared in the elections and which topics played a role in their success or failure. Wherever possible, the country chapters in this report provide public opinion data about critical political issues for populist voters and the characterization of crucial sociodemographics of populist voters across different parties and national contexts.

Finally, each country chapter assesses the impact of populist politics in their respective country and at the EU level (e.g., what kind of populist politics are the elected populist parties going to articulate in the EP and which may be their coalition strategy), allowing for the broader conclusions discussed in this report’s final section.



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**AUSTRIA**



# The Populist Radical-right Freedom Party in the Austrian 2024 EU elections

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## Abstract

The only competitive populist party running in the 2024 EU elections in Austria, the radical-right Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) relied on well-proven recipes that have made it one of the most successful populist parties in (Western) Europe for the last 30 years. It called for cutting down the EU's competences to half the size of its institutions and budget and harshly criticized its policies concerning migration, the war in Ukraine, the climate crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. This criticism was combined with a highly alarmist rhetoric that portrayed political opponents as either corrupt, fanatical or insane. While all this met with uniform criticism by other Austrian parties and large parts of the media, this again allowed the party to present itself as the sole party actually fighting for the Austrian interest against a broken system controlled by a single establishment 'unity party' (Einheitspartei). Once more, this strategy paid off and the FPÖ landed in the first place for the first time in a nationwide election.

*Keywords:* Austria; populist radical right; Euroscepticism; anti-establishment positioning; European Parliament

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## Austrian populism: The radical right Freedom Party

Populism in Austria so far has been confined mainly to parties of the (more or less) radical right. Throughout the years, several of these parties have entered the national and regional parliaments but sooner or later departed the scene. The one exception to this is the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ). Founded in 1956, it did not start as a populist party but descended from both liberal and German nationalist currents of the nineteenth century. While it managed to enter parliament in 1956 and has stayed there ever since it played a rather marginal role in the Austrian party system for the first three decades. However, this changed in 1987, when Jörg Haider was elected as party leader, transforming the FPÖ into one of the first and most successful populist radical-right parties in Europe (Heinisch 2003). Since then, the party has reached up to 27% of the vote in national elections and has not only participated in regional governments regularly but also entered national government three times (2000–2003, 2003–2005, and 2017–2019) through coalitions with the centre-right Austrian Peoples Party (ÖVP).

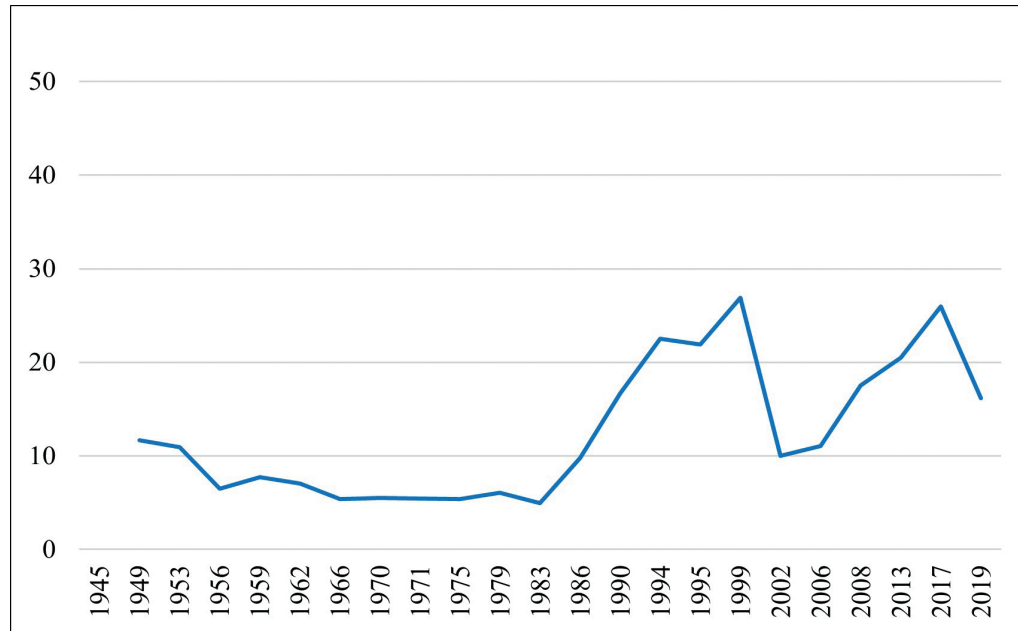
The party's success has been based on a strong focus on opposing migration policies, identity politics and authoritarianism, combined with classical elements of populism as a 'thin ideology' (Mudde 2017). Hence, the party holds a critical stance towards liberal elements of democracy like representation, the separation of powers, the protection of minorities and basic rights. Politics, thereby, is seen as a Manichean battle between 'good' and 'evil' in which the FPÖ portrays itself as the sole defender of the will of the Austrian people against corrupt (political) elites (Wodak 2005). While the fight against migration clearly has remained its core issue, the party has taken highly critical positions on measures aiming at fighting climate change or towards protective measures taken by the Austrian government during the COVID-19 pandemic (Eberl et al. 2021), among others.

Over the years, the FPÖ has gone through major crises, leading to party splits and significant electoral losses (see Figure 1). The party's successful 'stock response' so far has been its further radicalization in terms of its policies and rhetoric (Heinisch & Hauser 2016), but also in terms of its proponents and their contacts with organizations that have been classified as 'extreme right' by the Austrian Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution like the Identitarian movement or selected German nationalist fraternities (Bundesministerium für Inneres 2023). By now, the party has also established a quite dense network with other anti-liberal



populist actors like the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the French National Rally (RN), but also Vladimir Putin’s United Russia, with which the FPÖ even signed a formal partnership agreement in 2016 (i.e., after Russia’s illegal annexation of Ukrainian Crimea; Heinisch & Hofmann 2023).

Figure 1. Electoral results of the FPÖ in national elections 1945-2019 (% vote share)



Source: Austrian Ministry of the Interior (bmi.gv.at)

During the 2024 EU elections, the FPÖ was the only populist party represented in the Austrian parliament. The only other party that might be classified as populist that ran in the elections was the Democratic, Neutral, Authentic (DNA) list led by a former physician and anti-vaccine activist, who played an active role in protests directed against the protective measures taken by the Austrian government during the COVID-19 pandemic. This party, however, was founded just months before the elections, received hardly any media- and public attention, and failed to win a seat, taking just 2.7% of the votes. The following report will therefore restrict its focus to the FPÖ.

## The Freedom Party and EU affairs

Due to its German nationalist origins and the resulting denial of an Austrian nation, the FPÖ for decades was quite positive about the country joining the EU as a second-best option given the impossibility of a ‘reunification’ with Germany (Fallend 2008: 2010ff). It was only in 1991 when the party started to take a more critical position – which in the literature has been interpreted less as an ideological repositioning but as driven by electoral considerations of its then-party leader Haider, who in 1988 was



still claiming the Austrian nation was an *Ideologische Missgeburt* or ‘ideological monstrosity’ (Frölich-Steffen 2004). As a result, the right-wing FPÖ, together with the left-wing Green Party, opposed Austria’s EU accession during the campaign for the required constitutional referendum in 1994. However, while the Green Party modified its position soon after the referendum had passed successfully, the FPÖ stuck to its negative position, making itself (for most of the 30 years since then) the only parliamentary party publicly voicing harsh opposition against EU integration.

In line with the FPÖ’s ideological move from German nationalism to Austrian patriotism (Frölich-Steffen 2004), its position became even more critical over time. Until today, the party has never (openly) called for Austria to leave the EU. Still, it hailed the UK’s decision in favour of Brexit and, so far, has never rejected the possibility of a future ‘Öxit’ (Bartlau 2023). Also, the party not only opposes further integration but calls for the renationalization of decision-making powers to unwind purported aberrations evoked by both the Maastricht and the Lisbon Treaties (FPÖ 2017). In its current party manifesto, the FPÖ envisages a ‘Europe of Peoples’, rejecting ‘any artificial synchronisation ... through forced multiculturalism, globalization, and mass integration’. In the party’s view, cooperation within the EU must be based on the principles of subsidiarity and federalism and ‘[t]he basic constitutional principles of sovereign member states must have absolute priority over Community law’ (FPÖ 2024a).

## The Freedom Party’s 2024 EU campaign

In line with this position, in its 2024 campaign, the FPÖ repeatedly stated that it would not aim for an ‘Öxit’. However, it framed the elections as a ‘referendum’ about Austria’s ‘future’ and as a choice between a ‘centralized state’ on the one hand and ‘sovereignty’ on the other (Kurz, 2024). For this to be achieved, it called for ‘the EU to shed some pounds’ (*Weg mit dem Speck*) by halving both the size of the EU’s budget and its institutions. As the party’s front runner, Harald Vilimsky, put it:

The smaller the bureaucratic monster in Brussels, the less it is able to intervene in the lives of European citizens with ever more regulations. In contrast to what our opponents claim, we don’t want to destroy anything .... We only want to focus European cooperation on the original idea of the EU, which has long been forgotten: peace, freedom and prosperity. (Freiheitlicher Parlamentsklub 2024)

According to its electoral manifesto (FPÖ 2024b), the number of MEPs should



be cut by half since even the US Congress functions with fewer members, and that, in any event, the EP does not count as a real parliament (Vilimsky 2023). Moreover, the idea brought by Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán to abolish direct elections in favour of the pre-1979 system of national MPs representing their member states was seen as ‘definitely worth considering’ by Vilimsky (Kurier 2024).

Regarding policies, four topics dominated the party’s campaign: migration, the war in Ukraine, Climate change and, notably, the COVID-19 pandemic. Amongst those four, migration was the most important. The FPÖ rejected the EU’s Pact on Migration and Asylum and generally any mandatory distribution of asylum seekers across the EU. Instead, it called for a ‘Fortress Europe’ based on a ‘Pact on Re-Migration’ that should transform Europe’s human rights framework into a legal system that permits (a) pushbacks at the EU’s internal and external borders, (b) the denial of asylum to refugees stemming from non-European territory and (c) extra-territorial refugee camps, amongst others. While the Israel– Hamas war was scarcely raised as an issue, the party harshly criticized the EU’s activities in the war between Russia and Ukraine. It called for an immediate end to financial and military aid to Ukraine, as well as for the sanctions against Russia to be abolished due to their detrimental effects on the economy. While the EU was criticized for not trying to find a peaceful solution faithfully, the support for its policies by the Austrian government was criticized as a breach of the country’s constitutional obligation of neutrality.

Regarding environmental policy, the FPÖ demanded a stop to the European Green Deal, the EU Nature Restoration Law, and the scheduled ban on combustion engines. Concerning COVID-19, the party called for a ruthless elucidation of the EU’s allegedly questionable role during the pandemic. Amongst others, it demanded the disclosure of text messages sent between Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and the CEO of Pfizer, the pharmaceutical company from which the EU obtained its vaccinations (Vilimsky, 2024a). More generally, the EU’s COVID-19 policies were criticized for unjustified restrictions on individual freedoms and for having been abused to turn the EU into a *Schuldenunion* or ‘debt union’ (FPÖ 2024b).

The frames used by the FPÖ when pushing these claims were located mainly on the cultural dimension when it comes to questions of migration and the EU’s future development (see above). Arguments regarding global warming and the war in Ukraine were framed mainly in economic terms. The party called for *Klimapolitik mit Augenmaß*, namely, climate policies with a ‘sense of proportion’ regarding their economic effect. At the same time, the sanctions against Russia were criticized for



hurting Austria and the EU more economically than they hurt Russia.

Generally, however, the party's campaign was based less on arguments than on evoking negative emotions by using highly alarmist language combined with rhetoric that portrayed its political opponents on the national level – the ÖVP, the Social Democrats (SPÖ), the Greens and the Liberals – as all being part of an *Einheitspartei* or 'single political party' (Vilimsky 2024b), and EU-level actors as either corrupt, fanatical or insane. For example, on an election poster entitled 'Stop the EU-lunacy', a dystopic photo montage showed Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Commission President von der Leyen allegedly kissing each other intimately, surrounded by scenes entitled 'eco-communism', 'COVID-19 chaos', 'warmongering' and 'asylum-crisis' (Figure 2).

Figure 2. FPÖ Election poster



Source: FPÖ.at

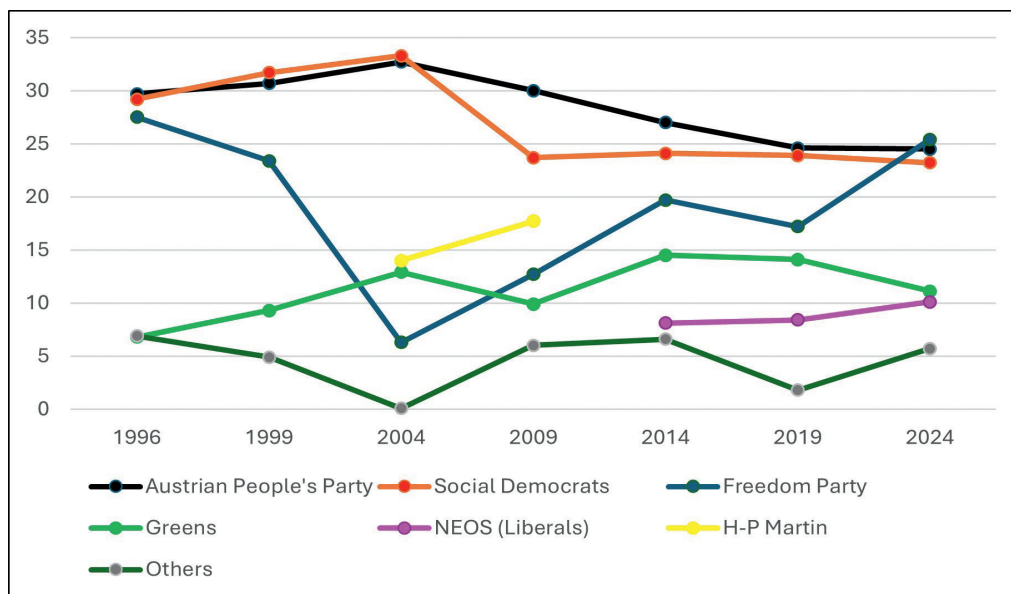
## The demand side of the EU: Critical populism in Austria

The FPÖ's mix of issues and its communicative strategy turned out to be successful (Figure 3). First, it increased its vote share significantly compared to 2019 (it should be noted, however, that the party was hit by a huge scandal – the so-called Ibiza affair – that led to the step-down of the FPÖ's then-party leader and Austria's deputy

chancellor, Heinz-Christian Strache and the collapse of the then ÖVP–FPÖ governing coalition just eight days before the election).<sup>1</sup> Second, and more importantly, for the first time ever, the FPÖ managed to end up in first place in a nationwide election. According to exit polls, the party won votes mainly from the ÖVP (about 221.000 out of the 891.000 votes for the FPÖ) but also from about 100,000 voters who, perhaps demotivated by the Ibiza affair, did not vote in 2019 (Laumer & Praprotnik 2024). Despite the win, electoral analyses in the media interpreted the result as slightly disappointing for the party, as many polls leading up to the election had predicted an even larger victory and a greater margin over the runner-up, the ÖVP.

There are three possible explanations for this. First, the turnout rates of FPÖ supporters at EU elections have traditionally been lower than in other national elections. Second, FPÖ voters, on average, had decided who they would vote for earlier than supporters of other parties, which might have led to biased polling results. Third, the second ‘populist’ party running for election, DNA, in many regards, focused on similar issues and hence provided an alternative to protest voters who otherwise might have opted for the FPÖ.

Figure 3. European Parliament election results by party, 1996-2024 (% vote share)



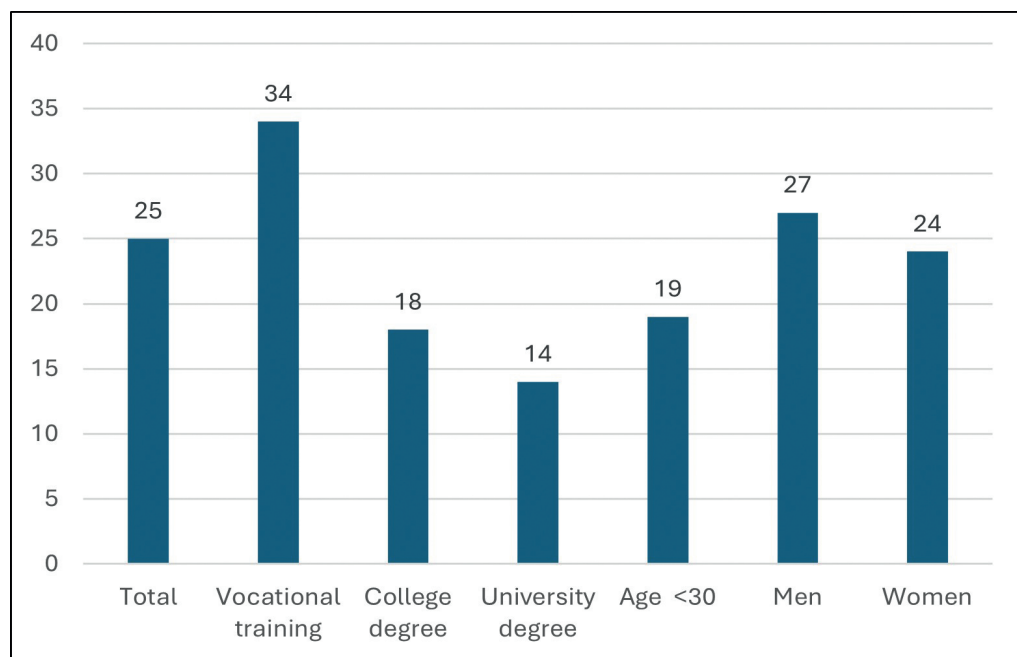
Source: Source: Austrian Ministry of the Interior (bmi.gv.at)

1. The Ibiza affair concerned a secretly recorded ‘honey-trap video’ published on 17 May 2019, showing a meeting between Strache and the FPÖ’s then deputy party leader Johann Gudenus in Ibiza with the alleged niece of a Russian oligarch in a private villa, where they discussed, amongst other things, ways of exchanging government contracts for party donations and positive media coverage through the investment in Austria’s largest tabloid newspaper (Obermaier & Obermayer, 2019).



Looking at sociodemographic characteristics (Figure 4), the FPÖ somewhat underperformed amongst voters below the age of 30. Regarding education, it was most successful amongst voters who had completed vocational training and least successful amongst high-school and university graduates. Interestingly, and in line with preceding regional elections (Salzburger Nachrichten 2024), the once significant gender gap has shrunk considerably compared to the elections in 2019. While back then, 26% of men but only 10% of women voted for the FPÖ, this time it was 27% of men compared to 24% of women. Amongst voters holding at least a college degree, the gap even vanished entirely, with 16% of men and 17% of women opting for the FPÖ (Laumer & Praprotnik 2024). Amongst others, these changes may be a consequence of the position the party took during the COVID-19 pandemic (especially its critique to discriminate restrictions between vaccinated and non-vaccinated citizens) – which was also found among many (also highly-educated) women (Die Presse 2021).

Figure 4. Support for the FPÖ among selected cohorts, 2024 EP elections (% vote share)

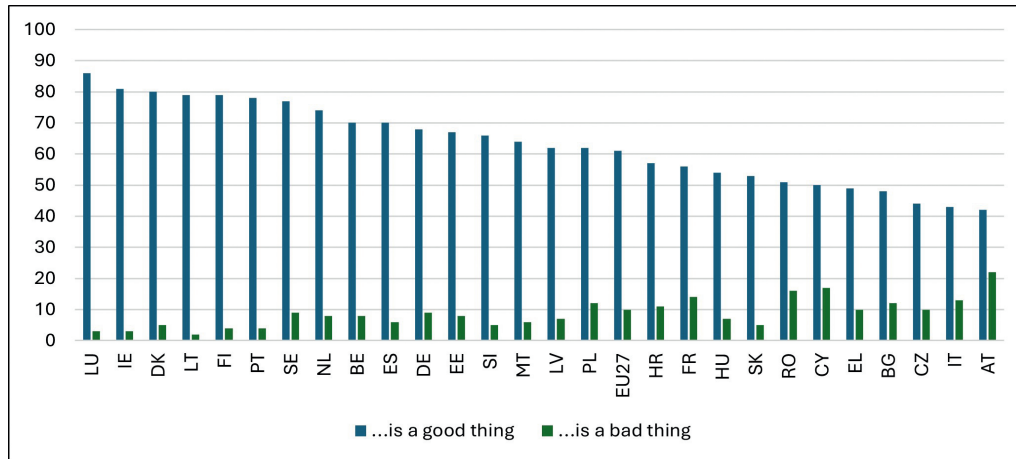


Source: Laumer & Praprotnik, 2024

Looking at voters' issue preferences shows that, generally, there is quite a significant demand for EU-critical positions within the Austrian electorate. While in the 1994 constitutional referendum on the country's EU accession, a two-thirds majority voted 'yes', approval rates started to drop soon thereafter, and Austrian citizens have ranked amongst the most critical ones across the EU ever since (Fallend 2008). As Figure 5 shows, in the Eurobarometer from autumn 2023

(European Parliament, 2023), Austria not only recorded the highest share of citizens seeing EU membership as a ‘bad thing’ (22%) but also the lowest share of those seeing it as a ‘good thing’ (42%).

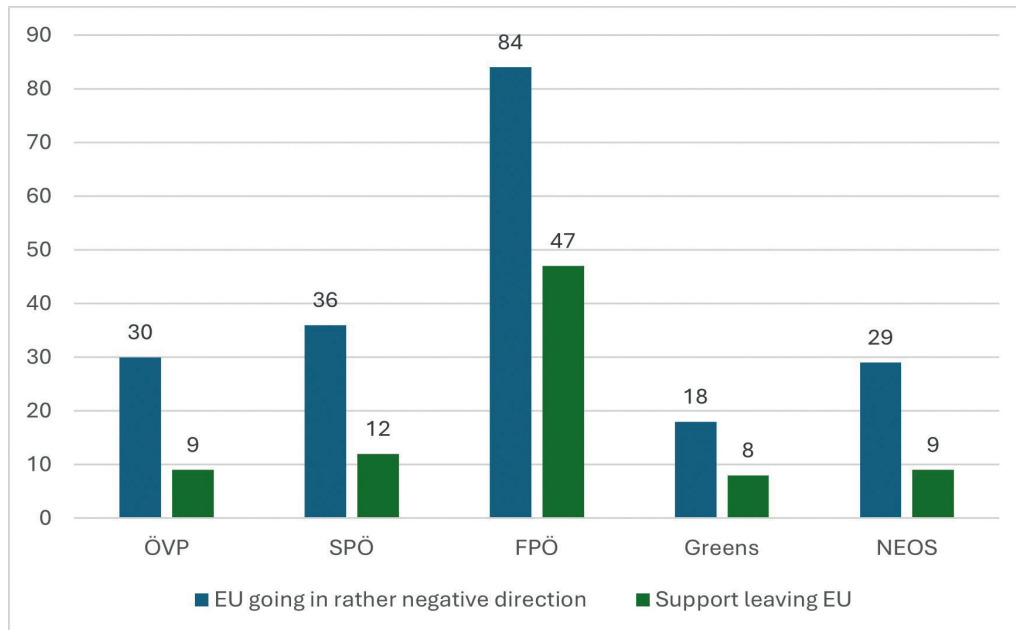
Figure 5. Attitudes towards EU membership (EU 27)



Source: Eurobarometer100.1 (EB044EP)

The FPÖ was very successful in attracting these groups. According to exit polls, 84% of its voters see the EU taking a rather negative development and 63% would even support Austria leaving the EU (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Party voters' attitudes towards the EU (% saying EU going in rather negative direction and in favour of leaving the EU)



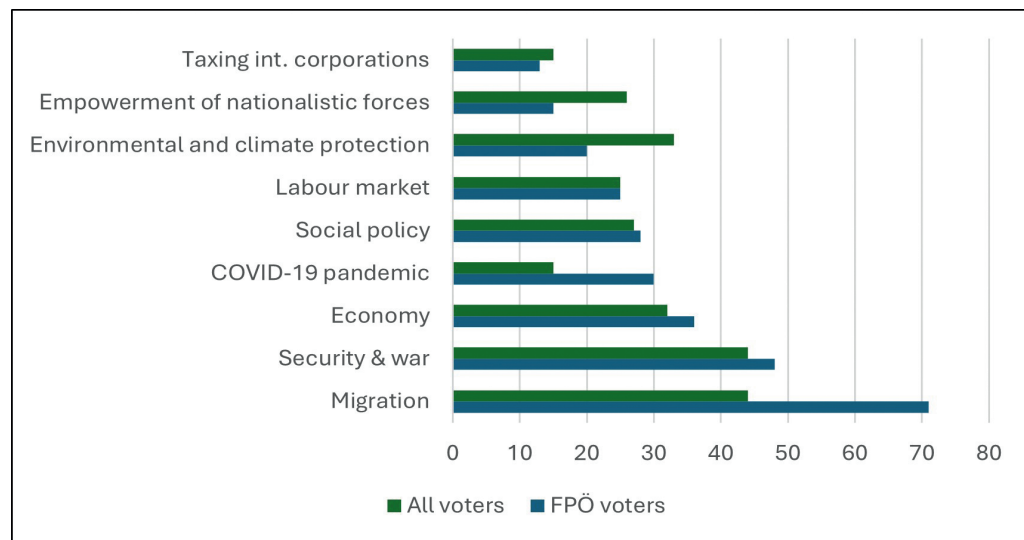
Source: Laumer & Praprotnik, 2024





Overall, however, only 4% stated that EU protest was their main reason to vote for the FPÖ, while 40% pointed to the party’s issue positions more generally. Looking at these issues, again, reveals a considerable overlap with the issues the party pushed in its campaign. Among the issues FPÖ voters discussed ‘a lot’ before the elections, ‘migration’ clearly ranks highest (71%), followed by ‘security and war’ (48%), the ‘economy’ (36%), and the ‘Covid pandemic’ (30%), with ‘environment and climate protection’ clearly lagging behind (20%)

Figure 7. Issues discussed ‘a lot’ amongst voters



Source: Laumer & Praprotnik, 2024

Public attention for the elections overall was relatively modest. About eight weeks before the elections, less than 50% of the Austrian electorate reported knowing the parties’ lead candidates, and even more stated that they could not assess their work (Die Presse, 2024). To the extent that the election was an issue, however, the FPÖ and its core issues featured quite prominently in the debates. In the three TV debates<sup>2</sup> that featured all lead candidates, migration and the war between Russia and Ukraine were discussed for the longest time (followed by the climate crisis). Given the singularity of its positions, the FPÖ was criticized by all other parties quite harshly in all these debates. This criticism resulted in the FPÖ receiving by far the most attention and also allowed the party to (once again) present itself as the only ‘real’ alternative vis-à-vis a purported *Einheitspartei* (‘single political party’), composed of the ÖVP, the Social Democrats (SPÖ), the Greens and the Liberals. A similar phenomenon can be observed regarding general news coverage where, for example, the election poster discussed above met with extensive

2. Puls24 (9 May 2024, 8.00pm), OE24 (4 June 2024, 9.00pm) ORF2 (5 June 2024, 8.15pm).

criticism by journalists both nationally and internationally, pushing attention to the FPÖ itself and its political demands even further (Hammerl 2024).

## Discussion and perspective

Summing up, the populist radical-right Freedom Party's run for the 2024 EP elections relied on well-proven recipes, which the party has been applying highly successfully throughout the last 30 years. In terms of issues, it focused on culturally framed topics like EU critique and calls against migration, which it combined with other issues that have been highly salient amongst the Austrian electorate and on which the party took a position that was taken by no other (established) Austrian party like an alleged 'neutral' position in the Ukrainian war (which de facto would result in strengthening the Russian side), and a highly critical position towards EU-measures to combat the climate crisis. Rhetorically, the party strongly relied on a Manichean frame, portraying its national opponents and EU-level actors/institutions as corrupt elites or members of the de facto *Einheitspartei*. This strategy seemingly paid off, as the FPÖ landed in the first place for the first time in a nationwide election.

Due to this success, there is little reason to expect the FPÖ to significantly change its strategy or the policies it prioritizes in the coming legislative period. Issues like migration, climate change or even the war in Ukraine are unlikely to vanish soon. And given that EU decisions constitutionally rely on broad centrist compromises, it suggests that whatever policies EU institutions manage to agree on, they will always provide ample room for criticism from a populist, radical-right point of view.

Concerning politics, it will be interesting to see how cooperation with other populist parties will proceed and develop in the coming term. Notably, the FPÖ was one of only two parties of the Identity and Democracy (ID) group that voted against the exclusion of the AfD due to statements of the latter's lead candidate suggesting sympathy for former members of the national-socialist SS just before the elections. After the elections, the FPÖ left ID and, together with Hungary's Fidesz (which left the European People's Party in 2021) and the Czech ANO (formerly of Renew Europe), founded Patriots for Europe (PfE), which most of the other former ID members have subsequently joined. However, negotiations with the AfD to join the group failed, leading to the foundation of another new group – Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN).



It remains to be seen how the FPÖ will position itself in possible future disputes between and within these groups like, for example, when it comes to their position concerning the Russia–Ukraine War, where some parties (like the FPÖ) hold close ties with Russia, while others see Russia as a security threat to their own country. Overall, however, it seems that politics at the EU level play a subordinate role for the party at large. Owing also to its nationalist agenda, the party probably does not see the main purpose of EU-level politics as shaping policies in Brussels but rather leveraging them to increase electoral support at home.

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**BELGIUM**



# Populist Radical Parties in Belgium and the 2024 European Elections

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## Abstract

In 2024 elections in Belgium were concurrently held for the European, federal and regional levels. For that reason, the European elections were clearly second-order elections. As the main opposition parties at the federal level, populist radical parties of the right (Vlaams Belang, VB) and the left (the Workers' Party of Belgium, PTB–PVDA) approached the 2024 elections in a strong position. They were portrayed as clear favourites in the polls and the media. From 2019 to 2024 they managed to set the agenda on their issues: migration and law and order for the VB, socioeconomic issues and civil liberties and rights for the PTB–PVDA. Both parties came out of the elections with more votes and seats. Part of the reason for this success is that their program matched with voters' priorities. Their populist, anti-elite rhetoric also permeated public opinion. Yet they were perceived as having underperformed electorally. Moreover, because they were not politically indispensable, they were quickly sidelined. At the European level, the VB and the PTB–PVDA will likely continue directly pushing their respective populist, Eurosceptic and radical agendas. They are also likely to have a real indirect contamination effect through mainstream parties and public opinion integrating part of their programmatic positions and priorities.

**Keywords:** *Belgium; radical parties; populism; voting behaviour; European elections*

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## Introduction

The 2024 European elections in Belgium appeared distinctly like the ‘mother of all elections’. Voters were called to cast ballots concurrently in three separate elections (European, federal and regional) held on the same day. Additionally, it had been five years since Belgian voters had faced a single election. Consequently, it was also a test of the balance of power between the numerous parties that form the two separate party systems operating in the country.

Belgium has a highly fragmented multiparty system. Since the split of traditional party families along the linguistic divide, Belgium has been characterized by two party systems operating separately (Table 1): Flemish parties compete in Flanders (the north of the country), whereas Francophone parties compete in Wallonia (in the south). Parties only compete together in Brussels.

Table 1. Parties with representation in the Belgian federal parliament, 2019-2024

Party family	Dutch-speaking	French-speaking
<b>Christian Democrats</b>	CD&V	Les engagés (formerly CDH)
<b>Greens</b>	Groen	Ecolo
<b>Regionalist parties</b>	N-VA	DéFI
<b>Liberals</b>	OpenVLD	MR
<b>Social Democrats</b>	Vooruit (formerly SP.A)	PS
<b>Populist radical right</b>	VB	-
<b>Populist radical left</b>	PVDA	PTB

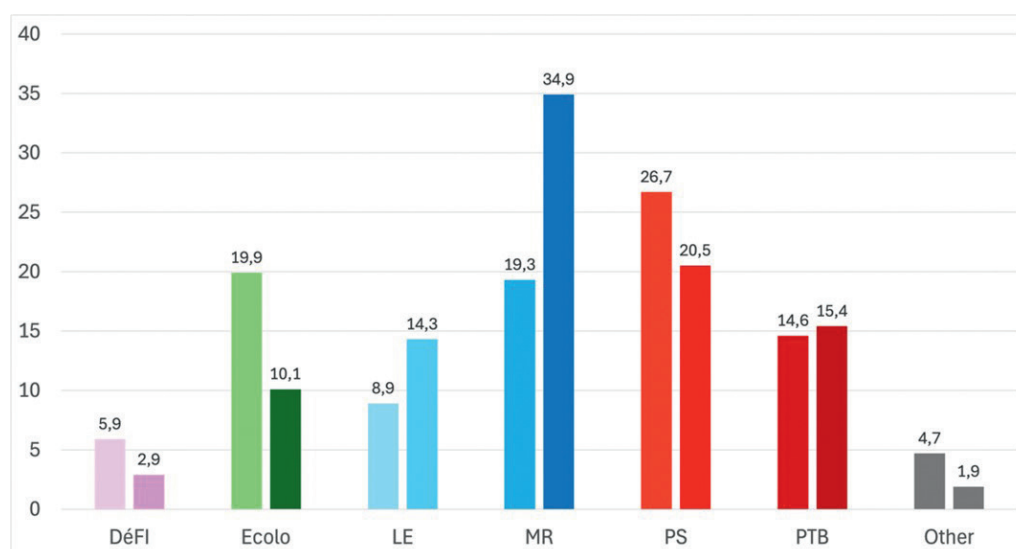
Source: Compiled by the author

Among these parties, two are clear cases of populist radical parties based on the PopuList categorization (<https://popu-list.org>): the radical-left Workers’ Party (Parti du Travail de Belgique–Partij van de arbeid, PTB–PVDA), the only relevant national party in Belgium (Delwit, 2014; 2022), and the radical-right Flemish Interest (Vlaams Belang, VB), a party that competes only in Flanders and in Brussels (van Haute & Pauwels, 2016). On the French-speaking side, the populist radical-right parties have always had a hard time anchoring themselves structurally in the political landscape (De Jonge, 2021b; Delwit & van Haute, 2021). The present chapter therefore analyses the electoral performance of the PTB–PVDA and the VB at the 2024 EP elections.

## Background

After a series of electoral setbacks after 2007 caused by the emergence of an alternative Flemish nationalist vote with the N-VA and internal tensions around the dominance of the party elite from Antwerp (van Haute & Pauwels, 2016), the populist radical-right VB returned to success at the 2019 European, federal and regional elections. The VB won a substantial number of seats: from 3 seats in the House of Representatives at the federal level in 2014 to 18 seats in 2019. More generally, 2019 saw a substantial shift in party preferences towards radical populist parties (Goovaerts et al., 2020) since the PTB-PVDA also won a significant number of seats (from 2 in 2014 to 12 seats in 2019). These results contributed to a fragmented and polarized political landscape, with VB gaining grounds in Flanders and PTB-PVDA winning in Walloon constituencies. These trends also characterized the concurrent European elections (Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1. Results for the French-speaking college in the 2019 and 2024 European elections (% vote share)

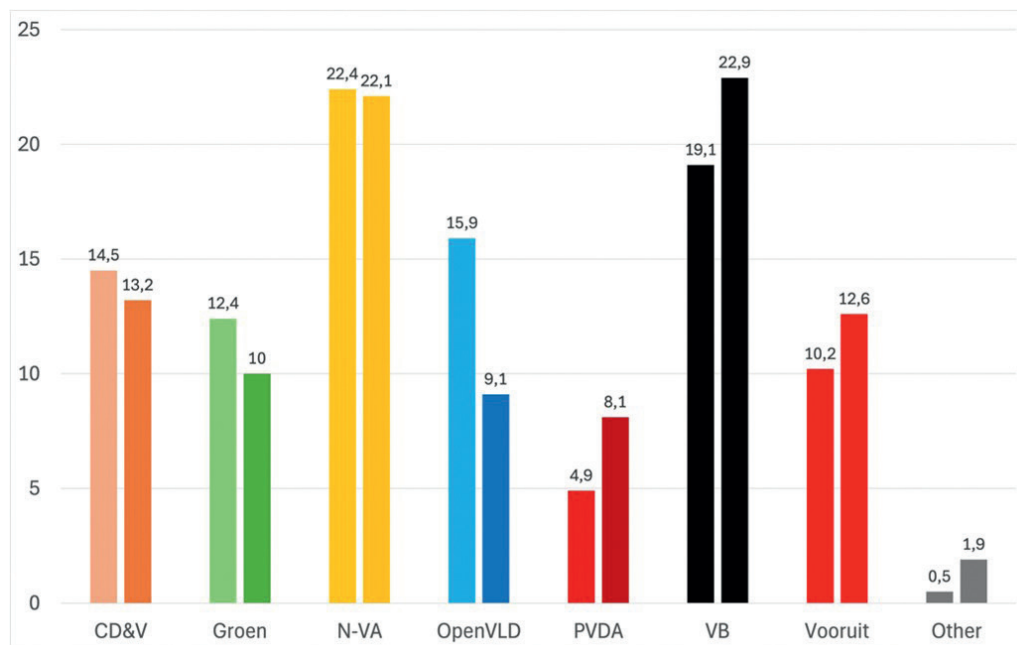


Source: <https://resultatselection.belgium.be/fr>





Figure 2. Results for the Dutch-speaking college in the 2019 and 2024 European elections (% vote share)



Source: <https://resultatselection.belgium.be/fr>

The profile of VB and PTB–PVDA voters in 2019 presented similarities. Data from the 2019 Belgian panel survey (Michel et al., 2024) show that both parties attracted a younger, more male voter group with lower levels of education and a protest component, and displaying lower levels of trust and satisfaction with the government, but also higher levels of anger (Gallina et al., 2020; Jacobs et al., 2024). Populist radical parties thus clearly capitalized on voters seeking an alternative. But they also attracted issue-based voting on their core respective issues (Goovaerts et al., 2020; Walgrave et al., 2020).

VB voters position themselves furthest to the right on the left–right axis and PTB–PVDA furthest to the left. For the PTB–PVDA, this positioning reflects the salience of socioeconomic issues for its voters, whereas for the VB, cultural issues are most salient (Pilet et al., 2020). What explains this difference in the success of populist radical parties across the linguistic divide is not so much the differences in attitudes between French- and Dutch-speaking voters. The average position on socioeconomic and migration issues, for instance, are very similar (Walgrave et al., 2019). Rather, it is the *structure of the party system* and the *salience of issues* that make a difference. The weakness of the radical-right party organizations in French-speaking Belgium is patent (Close & Ognibene, 2021); in contrast to the VB, such parties lack local anchorage, links with civil society organizations and leadership. Partly due to the cordon sanitaire in the French-speaking media (De Jonge, 2021a), radical-right

parties are not able to push their issues on top of the political agenda. While migration was the top priority among voters in Flanders in 2019, it only ranked fifth in Wallonia, where socioeconomic issues dominated (Walgrave et al., 2019).

The 2019–2024 legislature was particularly difficult at the federal level. The polarized results of 2019 put centrifugal pressures on parties in the two political sub-systems. Despite the extended period of minority caretaker government after the N-VA withdrew from the federal government in December 2018, the negotiations to form a new government after the 2019 elections quickly stalled. The position of the two main parties on each side of the linguistic border, the N-VA and the PS, proved irreconcilable as they were both pushed by the pressure of their respective radical challengers, the VB and the PTB. In March 2020, the COVID-19 crisis was an accelerator, and the caretaker government was given six months of full power as a minority government. In October 2020, sixteen months after the elections, a full government was finally formed, composed of seven parties: the two liberal parties (OpenVLD and MR), the two socialist parties (Vooruit and PS), the two green parties (Groen and Ecolo), and the Dutch-speaking Christian Democrats (CD&V). The new government had to deal with COVID-19 and its aftermath, as well as Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the consequent influx of refugees, the energy crisis and high inflation. With seven parties around the table, it was very difficult to agree on major reforms.

The challenge made it easy for opposition parties to capitalize on the weakness of the federal government. On the Dutch-speaking side, the main opposition came from the VB, as the N-VA was leading the Flemish regional government, which was also facing difficulties. On the French-speaking side, the main opposition came from the PTB and Les Engagés.

An analysis of the communication of all 13 parties represented in the federal parliament and their leaders on Twitter (now X) between 1 January 2022 and 31 March 2023 (N=16,330 tweets) reveals that populist radical parties were much more active on social media than mainstream parties (Close et al., 2023; see also Delwit & van Haute, 2021).

The content of this communication provides insights into the saliency and ownership of issues. Overall, the public debate in Flanders and French-speaking Belgium revolved around different issues. Flanders saw more focus on migration, law and order issues (crime, justice), and finance, whereas in French-speaking Belgium, the focus was more on energy, civil rights and liberties, and work (Close et al., 2023). Despite the





international context, European issues and foreign affairs were not dominant.

This agenda was particularly favourable to the populist radical parties. Close et al. (2023) have shown that the VB positions itself clearly on the most salient issues in Flanders. They come up first in terms of mentions of migration, law and order (including terrorism), but also lifestyle and religion. Interestingly, the party also comes second on EU issues after the Dutch-speaking Liberals (who held the federal prime ministership) and on animal welfare. They come up third in agriculture.

The PTB also position itself also on the most salient issues in Wallonia (Close et al., 2023), especially civil rights and liberties. The difference in discourse between the two branches of the party is striking in that regard. The results also show that the party avoids any mention of migration issues. Conversely, it clearly owns socioeconomic issues. The party ranks first in terms of mentions of employment, work, pensions, finances, and disasters (on the French-speaking side, linked to the floods of 2021). It ranks second on economy and foreign affairs.

Populist radical parties thus approached the 2024 elections in a strong position. They occupied the position of outsiders and alternative vote to an unpopular federal government. They owned the most salient issues in their respective polarized political landscapes. In Flanders, the VB was systematically polling first after autumn 2022 (VRT, 2023), and the PVDA was for the first time also showing anchorage in Flanders. In Wallonia, the PTB was polling third from March 2020, and the gap with the first two parties, the Socialists and the Liberals, was closing in after March 2022.

## An electoral victory portrayed as a political defeat

The European elections in Belgium were marked by a change in the electoral rules, allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to vote. After a controversy, voting was also made compulsory for this segment of the electorate. More generally, with no elections held in Belgium since 2019, the 2024 electorate comprised more than a million first-time voters, including 268,000 voters aged 16–17 for the EP elections, which had the potential to weigh on the results.

Radical parties performed extremely well electorally on 9 June (see Figures 1 and 2). At the European level, the VB ranked first in the Dutch-speaking group with

22.9% of the votes, representing an increase of almost 4 percentage points. Given the low number of seats allocated to the Dutch-speaking group (13 out of 22 for Belgium), the party failed to gain an additional seat and therefore tied with N-VA. The progress of the PTB–PVDA was asymmetrical. On the Dutch-speaking side, the party almost doubled its vote share, from 4.9% in 2019 to 8.1% in 2024. It allowed the party to get its first seat in the European Parliament in the Dutch-speaking group. On the French-speaking side, the PTB also confirmed progress. With 15.4% of the votes in the French-speaking group, it gained about 1 percentage point and climbed from the fourth (2019) to the third position. Again, given the low number of seats allocated (8), this symbolic progress did not see the party gain any additional representatives, again taking just one seat in the EP in the French-speaking group.

However, these good electoral performances were overshadowed by what happened at the federal and regional levels. On the Dutch-speaking side, even if the VB progressed and the N-VA lost votes and seats, the latter managed to remain the first party at these levels. The VB underperformed compared to expectations based on the pre-election polling, possibly due to the large number of undecided voters, which makes accurate polling difficult (Pilet et al., 2024). Also, politically, Bart De Wever, leader of the N-VA, clearly closed the door to the VB a couple of days before the elections and encouraged voters to vote for the N-VA, saying that a vote for the VB would be a lost vote. This call for strategic voting seems to have paid off, as N-VA remained the first party at the regional and federal levels but not at the European level, where voters had a lower incentive for strategic voting.

Another element that may have weighed is the performance of De Wever in a new popular TV show, *'Het conclaaf'* ('The Conclave'), where he spent a weekend locked away with the VB leader Tom Van Grieken. De Wever clearly dominated the exchanges. Finally, together, N-VA and VB did not come out of the elections with a majority of seats in the Flemish parliament, which de facto excluded this only coalition option. Vlaams Belang was thus quickly portrayed as the underperformer; N-VA managed to frame these results as a victory, and VB was excluded from the negotiations for government formation at the regional and federal levels. The PTB–PVDA also gained votes and seats. At the federal level they progressed in Flanders (from three seats in 2019 to six in 2024, now getting at least one seat in each constituency) and in Brussels (from two to three seats). In Brussels, the PTB mainly gained voters from the socialist party PS and came top among first-time voters (Biesemans et al., 2024). However, the party lost seats in the Walloon constituencies



(one at the federal level, two at the regional level). It did not manage to steal as many former PS voters, and it did not convince the first-time voters who turned more massively to the Liberals (MR) and the former Christian Democrats (LE) (Close et al., 2024). As for the VB, the party underperformed compared to what the polls had created regarding expectations, which overshadowed its other victories. The leadership of right-wing parties in the negotiations for government formation in Brussels and Wallonia also meant that the party was directly excluded from the equation.

## A program and communication in tune with voters' priorities

Vlaams Belang presented a classic populist radical-right manifesto for the 2024 elections. Titled 'Flanders Back to Us' (VB, 2024), the program puts ethnonationalism first, advocating for Flanders' independence from Belgium, power to the people, a stop to immigration and a strong take on law and order. Socioeconomic, fiscal and cultural issues are framed in ethnonationalistic terms. In a classic welfare chauvinist approach, national preference is portrayed as the solution to poverty and high housing prices and better health care services; independence is painted as the solution to fiscal and budgetary issues, as the party denounces fiscal transfers to French-speaking Belgium and asks for the return of 'Flemish money in Flemish hands' (VB, 2024: 10).

Since elections were held concurrently for three levels, more local issues were covered first, while Europe was discussed in detail only on the last two pages of the VB manifesto (VB, 2024: 96–97). The party uses the 'taking back control' tagline and denounces EU leaders as 'extreme' (and overly bureaucratic/technocratic), hallmarks of a populist radical-right platform. The party opposes further enlargement and positions itself against EU interference in the national politics of illiberal democracies (e.g., Hungary), as well as EU policies on climate, agriculture and migration. The party's list of specific proposals includes stifling the European Parliament, reducing Belgium's budget contribution, negotiating a package of opt-outs from certain EU policies and legislation, defending Western values and promoting the subsidiarity principle and member states' sovereignty. Interestingly, the manifesto avoids concrete topics related to foreign affairs, such as the Russia–Ukraine War and the war in Gaza.

PTB–PVDA also presented a classic populist radical-left program for the 2024 elections. Titled ‘The Choice to Break Away’ (PTB, 2024), the program puts socioeconomic issues first, advocating for fiscal justice, more social policies and purchasing power for households, better jobs, the right to healthcare, the end of political privileges, and a social climate policy. Highly active on university campuses, the party also tailored its message to young people, which was also likely driven by an interest in mobilizing first-time voters. Similarly, the party takes a notably progressive position on rights and liberties, especially racial discrimination, feminism and LGBTQ+ issues.

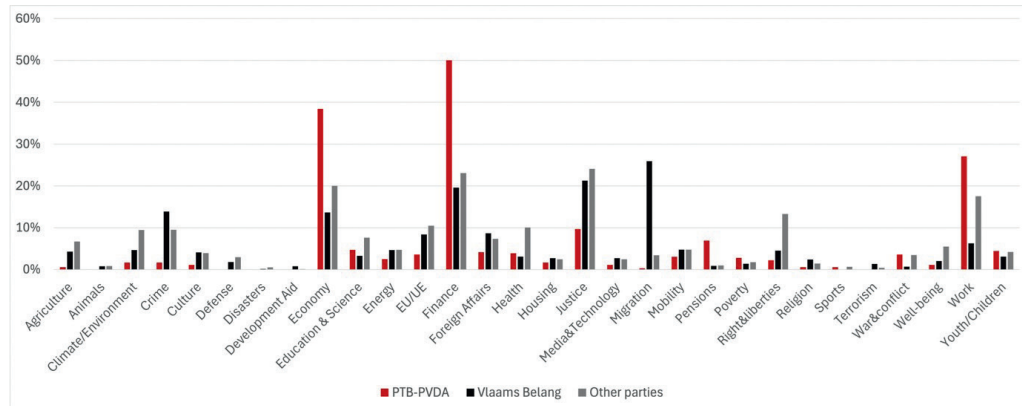
The concurrent elections also blurred the VB’s specific positions regarding the EU. The party developed a separate program for the European elections, which did not contribute to making it visible. This program reflected the VB’s populist orientation, with an explicit equation of Europe with a distant class of wealthy and privileged elites. Nevertheless, while the VB mobilizes cultural values and identities to underpin its populist rhetoric, the PTB–PVDA mobilizes a socioeconomic discourse that denounces a capitalist Europe imposing austerity on the poor through nondemocratic rules. The party takes a clear stance against austerity, privileges, inequalities, poverty, punitive environmental taxes, social dumping and the logic of profit and the market. It advocates addressing the root causes of migration, such as poverty in the Global South. Regarding external affairs, the party justifies its nonalignment and rejection of NATO in terms of a commitment to striving for peace. On the Israel– Hamas war, it takes a clear position in favour of Palestine, denouncing acts of genocide as against international law and human rights.

The parties’ programs were heavily relayed online. Vlaams Belang is the absolute leader in online communication in Belgium. The party spent €1.5 million during the four months preceding the elections (Ryckmans, 2024). PVDA ranked fourth, spending €708,933. While the PTB had been very present during the legislature, it took a step back during the campaign.

The content of their respective communication reveals the saliency of issues they own (Figure 3). The VB clearly made migration the salient issue in its communication during the campaign. More than a quarter of its communication on X is on this issue. The gap with other parties is massive. The party also over-communicated on crime but to a lesser extent. The PTB–PVDA clearly stands out with its focus on finance, the economy, pensions, work and all socioeconomic issues. Europe is not central to these parties; they mention it less than other parties.



Figure 3. Issue saliency in the communication of the VB and the PTB-PVDA on X (1 January 2024-15 May 2024)



Source: Social Media Lab, 2024

While the content reveals the ideological focus of these parties, the tone of their communication connects to their populist core. Both parties heavily rely on attacks as a mode of communication. Previous studies have shown that personal or programmatic attacks represent 26.5% of the total communication of the VB on X (first party in Belgium) and 25% for the PTB–PVDA (Close et al., 2023).

These programmatic priorities match voters’ priorities. The 2024 Belgian voter panel survey asked voters an open-ended question: ‘What is the most important issue in Belgium at the moment?’ The question was asked in wave 2 of the survey during the campaign. Results show that, in Flanders, three issues stand out: budget and finances, as well as migration and political representation, a category that refers to trust, competence, extremism, and populism (Table 2). These issues match populist radical-right demands. In Brussels and Wallonia too, migration and political representation rank high, together with the economy. Crime and justice, employment and institutional reforms form a second block of priorities. These priorities match populist demands towards a change in political elites and institutions, as well as the socioeconomic agenda of the radical left. The populist, anti-elite rhetoric of the two parties also permeated public opinion.

Table 2. The most important issues for voters in 2024 (% saying 'most important' by region)

Issue categories	Wallonia N=2,230	Brussels N=2,012	Flanders N=3,451
Budget & finances	8.1	9.6	19.3
Migration	11.3	13.3	18.2
Political representation	13.9	15.0	17.5
Societal transformation - Values	6.9	9.6	9.7
Economy	16.8	13.5	8.2
Community & state reform	8.9	10.4	7.6
Climate	4.3	6.6	6.6
Crime & justice	9.7	8.9	4.8
Employment	8.8	5.0	3.0
Europe	0.7	0.7	0.1

Source: 2024 Belgian voter panel survey

## Conclusion

The 2024 elections in Belgium saw voters casting ballots for three separate levels: European, federal and regional. In this context, the EU elections were clearly second-order elections. As main opposition parties at the federal level, populist radical parties of the right (VB) and the left (PTB–PVDA) approached the 2024 elections in a strong position. They were portrayed as clear favourites in the polls and the media. During 2019–2024 they managed to set the agenda on their issues, among other things, via a robust online presence.

Both parties came out of the elections with more votes and seats. Part of this success is because their programs matched voters' priorities. Yet they were perceived as having underperformed. And because they were not politically indispensable, they were quickly sidelined from negotiations at the regional and federal levels. At the European level, the Belgian delegation is limited, and the fragmentation of the party systems leaves the VB and the PTB–PVDA with a very limited number of seats to weigh in on policies. Nevertheless, they are expected to continue pushing their respective populist, Eurosceptic and radical agendas. As has been the case at the national level in Belgium, their programmatic positions and priorities have contaminated public opinion and the mainstream parties, which feel pressured by their success, something that is a significant source of concern.





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BULGARIA





# Populism and Polycrisis in Bulgaria on the Eve of the 2024 European Parliament Elections

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## Abstract

The 2024 European Parliament election in Bulgaria took place amidst a prolonged political crisis and economic uncertainty. The EP elections, for the first time, coincided with national legislative elections – the sixth parliamentary elections in just three years. This two-in-one vote led to a complete overshadowing of the debate on Europe by domestic issues and concerns over the composition of the next national parliament and the likelihood of forming a stable government. The centre-populist GERB convincingly won the elections, although the populist radical right increased its representation by one MEP. Like many European countries, Bulgaria has had to contend with the rise of populism and nationalism, in addition to its continued struggle against corruption and, as a result of the war in Ukraine, with a population divided in attitudes towards Russia. This polycrisis has led to continued political fragmentation and polarization with little prospect of stable government and a growing disillusionment among voters.

**Keywords:** *European Parliament elections; populism; polycrisis; Bulgaria; new parties*

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## Introduction

The 2024 European Parliament election in Bulgaria took place amidst a prolonged political crisis and economic uncertainty. The EP elections, for the first time, coincided with national legislative elections – the sixth parliamentary elections in just three years. This two-in-one vote led to a complete overshadowing of the debate on Europe by domestic issues and concerns over the composition of the next national parliament and the likelihood of forming a stable government. The centrist populist GERB convincingly won the elections, although the populist radical right (PRR) increased its representation by one MEP. Like many European countries, Bulgaria has had to contend with the rise of populism and nationalism, in addition to its continued struggle against corruption and, as a result of the war in Ukraine, with a population divided in attitudes towards Russia. This polycrisis has led to continued political fragmentation and polarization with little prospect of stable government and a growing disillusionment among voters.

## Anatomy of a polycrisis: Between economic uncertainty and political turmoil

The past four years in Bulgaria have been characterized by political instability, turmoil and never-ending electoral campaigning. A string of caretaker governments, six parliamentary elections (with a seventh one scheduled for October 2024), a presidential election and a local election have led to politicizing every issue in society for electoral gain. During this period, a number of new parties have appeared with varied success dramatically changing the configuration of political actors and patterns of voter support, while voter turnout has steadily decreased (Figure 1). This political uncertainty is unfolding in the context of multiple pressing issues: 1) economic downturn and slow recovery from the pandemic, coupled with lack of political consensus on economic priorities; 2) geostrategic uncertainty as a result of the war in Ukraine and the escalating conflict in the Middle East with the war in Israel, Gaza, and now also in Lebanon; 3) deepened divisions among political actors and voters along the long-standing pro-Russian/anti-Russian divide; 4) rising nationalist sentiments stirred by deteriorating relations with Russia and North Macedonia (Zankina 2024b).

With the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Bulgaria plunged into a period of economic uncertainty and political turmoil. Four years later, Bulgaria still struggles

with economic recovery and is unable to effectively absorb and utilize funds from the European Recovery and Resilience Facility. Prolonged anti-government protests that started in July 2020 unleashed a never-ending cycle of parliamentary elections and a mushrooming of new political formations.

Between April 2021 and June 2024, Bulgaria held six parliamentary elections and had two short-lived regular governments. Interim governments appointed by President Radev became the norm while a series of parliaments failed to agree on a governing formula. Thus, early elections were held in July 2021, November 2021, October 2022, April 2023 and June 2024. The leading parties have changed significantly compared with just a few years ago. Although Citizens for European Development (GERB), which has dominated domestic politics since 2007 and has led three governments, still attracted the most votes in the elections of October 2022, April 2023 and June 2024, it lost over half a million votes (or more than half of the voter support it had in 2017). The centre-left Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), the oldest political party in the country and the heir to the former communist party, saw its vote share drop to 7% in June 2024 compared to 28% in 2017.

In the meantime, new parties emerged as dominant political forces—namely Prodalzhavame Promyanata (PP—We Continue the Change), a new anti-corruption and pro-European party, and Vazrazhdane (Revival), a starkly nationalist and pro-Russian party. More new parties have come and gone, with some managing to register momentary success, such as the populist party headed by prominent folk-pop singer and television showman Slavi Trifonov, Ima Takav Narod (ITN—There Is Such a People), which won the July 2021 early elections with 24% of the vote, but failed to form a government and has since oscillated around the parliamentary threshold. Others, such as, Izpravi se! Mutri vun! (Stand Up! Mafia, Get Out!) led by a former ombudswoman, Maya Manolova, managed to pass the threshold in April and July of 2021 but then disappeared altogether. The democratic centre-right witnessed yet another reconfiguration in a new collation called Demokraticzna Balgariya (Democratic Bulgaria, DB), bringing together Demokrati za Silna Balgariya (Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria, DSB) and Da Balgariya (Yes, Bulgaria) and a new nationalist formation called Velichie (Glory) surprised political analysts with 4.65% at the national elections in June 2024.





Table 1. Results from Bulgarian parliamentary elections (2017-2024)

Type	Party	Mar-17			Apr-21			Jul-21			Nov-21			Oct-22			Apr-23			Jun-24			
		Votes	%	MP	Votes	%	MP	Votes	%	MP	Votes	%	MP	Votes	%	MP	Votes	%	MP	Votes	%	MP	
Established/Mainstream	GERB	1,147,292	33.5	95	837,707	26.18	75	642,165	23.51	63	596,456	22.74	59	634,575	25.33	67	669,924	26.49	69	530,568	24.71	68	
	BSP	955,490	27.9	80	480,146	15.01	43	365,695	13.39	36	267,817	10.21	26	232,942	9.3	25	225,941	8.93	23	151,560	7.06	19	
	MRF	815,976	9.24	26	336,906	10.51	30	292,514	10.71	29	341,000	13	34	344,621	13.76	36	346,437	13.72	36	366,310	17.06	47	
Other/hybrid	Volia	145,637	4.25	17	75,926*	2.13*	0	85,795*	3.14*	0													
	RB/DB	107,407	3.14	0																			
	DaBG/DG	101,177	2.96	0	302,280	9.45	27	345,331	12.64	34	166,968	6.37	16	186,493	7.44	20	621,069*	24.56*	64*	307,849*	14.33*	39*	
New parties/protest parties	ITN				565,014	17.66	51	657,829	24.08	65	249,743	9.52	25	96,071	3.83	0	103,971	4.11	11	128,007	5.96	16	
	ISMV ecc				150,940	4.72	14	136,885	5.01	13	60,055	2.29	0	25,207	1.01	0	56,453	2.24		31,476	1.47		
	PP									673,170	25.67	67	505,985	20.2	53	621,069*	24.56*	64*	307,849*	14.33*	39*		
	BV												115,858	4.63	12	77,420	3.06		12,322	0.57			
Nationalist/PRR	VNIRO				116,434	3.64	0			28,322	1.08	0	20,177	0.81	0					21,272	0.99		
	NFSB	318,513	9.7	27	75,926*	2.13*	0	85,795*	3.14*	0	8,584	0.33	0	3,520	0.14	0							
	ATAKA				15,659	0.49	0	12,585	0.46	0	12,153	0.46	0	7,593	0.3	0	10,505	0.42					
	Vazrazhdane Velichie	37,896	1.11	0	78,414	2.45	0	82,147	3.01	0	127,586	4.86	13	254,808	10.17	27	358,174	14.16	37	295,915	13.78	38	
No one																				63,913		13	
Voter turnout				3,682,151	54.1		3,334,283	50.61		2,775,410	42.19		2,669,260	40.23		2,601,963	39.41		2,683,606	40.69		2,268,849	34.41

\*Running in a coalition together

Source: Central Electoral Commission, cik.bg

Within this period, Bulgaria had two short-lived regular governments. A new coalition government was formed in December after the November 2021 elections, under the premiership of Kiril Petkov, uniting the winner of the election PP (25.67%) with three coalition partners—BSP, ITN and the DB alliance. The government survived until June 2022, when it was removed by a parliamentary vote of no confidence initiated by GERB after ITN ended its support for the government and withdrew its members from ministerial posts. The Petkov government had the difficult task of dealing with the war in Ukraine, which erupted in February 2022 and divided public opinion in Bulgaria. With a large pro-Russian population, the war enabled parties like Vazrazhdane to thrive while constraining the government to maintain a delicate balance between the country’s commitment to its Euro-Atlantic partners and pressure from pro-Russian groups. Although Bulgaria enforced EU sanctions on Russia, phased out Russian oil deliveries, and provided military support for Ukraine, there has been continuous opposition from both inside and outside the National Assembly to these actions (Zankina, 2023).

The second regular government was formed following the April 2023 elections. In these elections, GERB placed first, with 26.5% of the votes and 69 seats, closely followed by an alliance between PP and DB, which obtained 24.6% of the votes and 64 seats. GERB sought to form a coalition government with PP–DB. After several rounds of difficult negotiations and a second mandate granted by President Radev, the two alliances agreed on a technocratic government with a rotating prime minister. Despite the strong antagonism and competition between the two leading blocs in parliament, GERB and PP–DB recognized as a greater threat the continued rise in electoral support for Vazrazhdane and the growth in pro-Russian sentiments in the country. Hence, a government headed by Nikolai Denkov of PP–DB was approved by the National Assembly. Denkov was to be replaced by the Deputy Prime Minister and minister of foreign affairs and former European Commissioner, Mariya Gabriel of GERB, after a period of nine months. As expected, the rotation did not take place,

and the coalition partners slid into political bickering and mutual accusations. The government collapsed in March 2023, and two-in-one elections (European parliament plus early parliamentary elections) were scheduled for June 2024.

## Populism in Bulgaria

Populism has been a permanent feature of Bulgarian political life since the early 2000s, expressing itself both in the centre and the radical right. While there have not been left populist parties in Bulgaria, both centre and radical-right populists have been noted for advocating various left and extreme left policies, from significant increases in pensions to nationalization of entire industrial sectors. In addition to the PRR, which has had a permanent presence in the national parliament since 2005, Bulgaria is also notable for having populists in government who have held power almost uninterruptedly between 2009–2021 and, most recently, in 2023–2024.

### *Centre populism*

Centrist populists have had much greater success than radical-right populists in Bulgaria, all of them having led or participated in governing coalitions. This participation makes the Bulgarian case rather unique. Unlike radical-right populists who represent varying combinations of authoritarianism, nativism and nationalism, centrist populists in Bulgaria have been *decidedly pro-European*. The main mobilizing factor in their success has been a mix of charismatic leadership and anti-corruption appeals.

Populism made its grand entrance on the Bulgarian political scene in 2001 when the former Bulgarian king, Simeon Sakskoburggotski (King Simeon II from 1943–1946), who had been in exile for nearly six decades, made a dramatic reappearance. Heading the National Movement Simeon the Second (NDSV), the former king convincingly won the 2001 parliamentary elections and became prime minister. A typical personalist and populist party, NDSV had loose structures based on circles of associates, proclaiming itself to be not a party but a “coalition of like-minded individuals”. Capitalizing on disillusionment with the transition and established elites, NDSV relied on a vague platform and ambitious promises such as “fixing the country in 800 days” (Gurov and Zankina, 2013). The NDSV government firmly pushed the country towards the Euro-Atlantic alliance and oversaw Bulgaria’s entrance into NATO. Despite such success, in the subsequent 2005 elections, NDSV lost its leading position, taking part instead in a BSP-led coalition



government. By 2009, NDSV had all but disappeared from the political scene, only to be replaced by another personalist and centrist populist party – GERB. The short-lived success of NDSV marked the birth of populism in post-communist Bulgarian politics and legitimized the personalist party model, which dominates politics to the present day.

GERB was formed in late 2006 by Boyko Borisov, while he was mayor of Sofia. Shortly after its establishment, GERB gained the endorsement of the European People's Party (EPP) at the first European Parliament elections in Bulgaria after the country joined the EU in 2007 and secured 5 of the 18 Parliament seats allocated to Bulgaria. By the time of the July 2009 Bulgarian legislative elections, GERB had established itself as a major political force and received over 40% of the votes. Boyko Borisov became the dominant figure in Bulgarian politics, serving as prime minister three times (Spirova and Sharenkova-Toshkova, 2021).

Replicating Saksokoburggotski's formula, GERB at first lacked an established party structure and ideological coherence. GERB's program consisted of elusive and symbolic issues, such as 'corruption' and 'crime', which appealed to a discontented electorate, while its party officials represented a hastily and often apparently randomly selected group of experts and people from Borisov's personal circle. In the course of its long and successful rule, GERB developed dense structures throughout the country, penetrating the national, regional and local governments and establishing a loyal electoral base. These structures have been crucial in securing GERB's almost uninterrupted hold on power for over a decade and the party's continued success in every parliamentary and European election since 2007.

GERB's rule ultimately became associated with the corrupt status quo, provoking prolonged anti-government protests on several occasions. The 2020–2021 anti-government protests posed the greatest challenge to GERB's hold on power, with demands that Borisov and the prosecutor-general, Ivan Geshev, resign, calls that were backed by President Radev. The protests gave birth to a string of new political formations, the most notable of which was ITN.

Electorally, the most significant party to emerge and achieve success from the anti-government protests was founded and led by the prominent singer and long-standing television showman Slavi Trifonov: Ima Takav Narod (There Is Such a People, ITN). Although his party was new, Trifonov was not new to politics; most notably, he had been a driving force behind the 2016 referendum on reform of the electoral system.

Trifonov used his media appearances, including his own TV station and virtual concerts, to spread his anti-corruption and anti-status quo message to voters at home and abroad alike, striking a chord of homeland undertones (Haughton, Neudorfer and Zankina, 2024). In the July 2021 elections, ITN garnered 24.1% of the votes and 65 seats and succeeded in narrowly defeating GERB, which only managed to attract 23.5% and 63 seats, marking the first time since 2007 that GERB or a GERB-led coalition had not been placed first in elections. ITN failed to form a government and was eclipsed by yet another populist party from the centre, Prodalzhavame Promyanata (We Continue the Change, PP).

Formed by entrepreneurs and Harvard graduates Kiril Petkov and Assen Vassilev, PP reaped the popularity its leaders had gained as ministers in the outgoing caretaker government. PP placed first in the November 2021 legislative elections with 25.7% of the vote and 67 seats. Running on an anti-corruption platform and declaring to “promote left politics with right instruments”, PP managed to undercut other new protest parties, including ITN. A new coalition government was formed, headed by Kiril Petkov, with three coalition partners – BSP, ITN and DB. Since its appearance in the fall of 2021, PP has already lost more than half of its electoral support, although its coalition with DB has managed to remain among the top three political formations in the national parliament. Most importantly, the PP–DB alliance managed to return to government in coalition with GERB in 2023 on a pro-European and reform-oriented platform. Coalescing with GERB proved disastrous for the PP–DB coalition, which lost over half of its support in the concurrent national and EP elections of June 2024.

### ***Radical-Right Populism***

In 2005, Bulgaria witnessed the firm establishment in politics of the populist radical right (PRR), which since then has been represented in parliament as well as in the European Parliament. Radical-right populism in Bulgaria emerged relatively late compared to other East European countries. Since 2005, various configurations of nationalist populist radical-right parties have been represented in parliament and, between 2017–2021, even in government. Those include Ataka, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO), the National Front for Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB), and, more recently, Revival (Vazrazhdane) and Greatness (Velichie). In the decade and a half before 2021 and the cycle of early parliamentary elections, around one in ten voters cast their ballots for nationalist parties (Haughton, Neudorfer and Zankina, 2024).

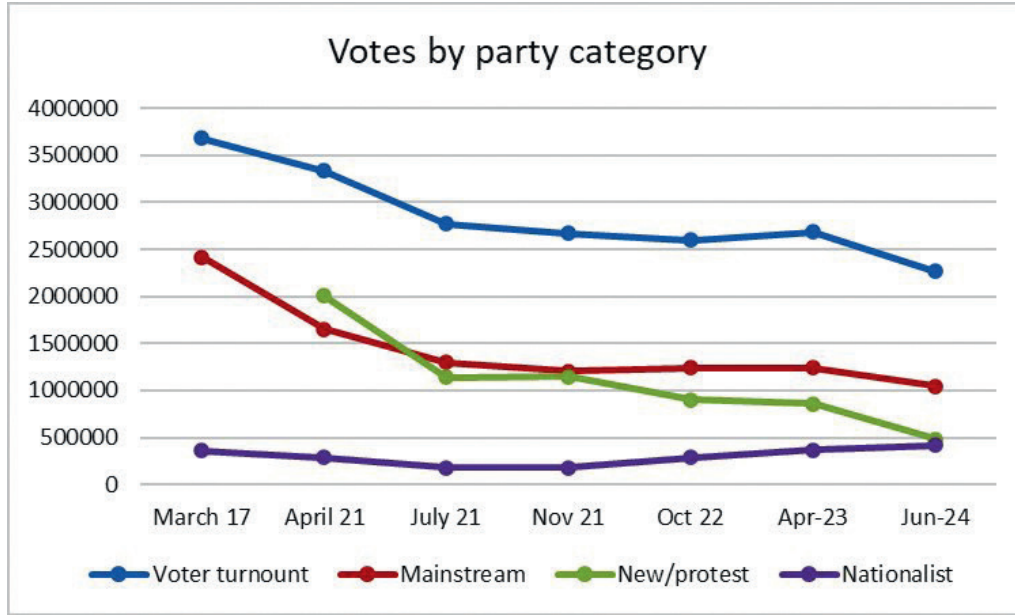


Most recently, the PRR vote has significantly increased, reaching over 18% in the June 2024 elections, a function also of the historically low voter turnout (Figure 1). The PRR vote has been extremely volatile and shifting between various PRR parties and new protest parties. In the July 2021 election, for instance, IMRO–Bulgarian National Movement, the Volya Movement and NFSB came together under the umbrella of Bulgarian Patriots. But during the November 2021 election, all three of those parties and Ataka ran separately, yielding no seats for any of them, at the expense of Vazrazhdane, which increased its support tenfold from March 2017 to April 2023 (ibid., 2024).

PRR parties rely on the usual repertoire of dividing issues. Bulgaria's sizeable ethnic Turkish and Roma minorities, as well as a string of migration crises in Europe, have provided fertile ground for nationalist rhetoric and mobilization. Most of those actors are clearly anti-elite, anti-West, and even antidemocracy (Zankina, 2023). PRR parties have cashed in on the overall discontent with politics and political elites, as well as on particular issues such as ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ rights, social provisions and welfare chauvinism, as well as criticism of NATO and EU memberships. With 58% of the population reporting positive attitudes towards Russia and Putin before 2022, the war in Ukraine has provided a fertile ground for PRR parties who have been pronouncedly pro-Russian (Zankina, 2023). Vazrazhdane has been particularly successful in benefiting from the polycrisis, combining anti-vax, anti-NATO and anti-EU rhetoric.

The war in Ukraine provided an unprecedented opportunity for Vazrazhdane's leader, Kostadin Kostadinov, to broadcast his pro-Russian views and stage eccentric activities, attracting ever more votes with each subsequent early election (Zankina, 2024a). In the combined June 2024 elections for the national parliament and the European Parliament, Vazrazhdane scored close to 14%, becoming the third largest party in the Bulgarian parliament with 38 MPs, coming in fourth in the European Parliament elections and sending 3 MEPs to Brussels. While most parties have adopted a cordon sanitaire towards Vazrazhdane, the party has become a key factor in Bulgarian politics and an actor to reckon with. Just like Vazrazhdane managed to steal the votes from early PRR formations, Velichie has managed to grab enough votes to enter parliament. Its party group dissolved only a couple of weeks after entering parliament, and the party is unlikely to pass the threshold in the October 2024 election. Velichie's success illustrates what we observe at the European level – that the radical right has a permanent and growing presence, yet it is highly divided.

Figure 1: Bulgarian parliamentary election results by party category (2017-2024)



Source: Authors' calculations based on data by the Central Electoral Commission: cik.bg

## The 2024 European Parliament elections

Centrist and radical-right populists have been represented at the European Parliament since the first EP elections in Bulgaria in 2007 (See table 2). GERB is considered an important partner for the EPP, sending five to six MEPs in each parliament. Populist radical-right parties, in turn, have been represented among the Non-attached (NA), the ECR and now also the ESN.

The 2024 EP elections are the first EP elections in Bulgaria to coincide with national legislative elections. Analysts expected a higher voter turnout due to the mobilizing effect of national elections. While voter activity in 2024 was about 1% higher than in 2019 (33.78% and 32.64%, respectively), the voter turnout for the national elections dropped to 34.41% from 40.69% in April 2023. This record-low voter turnout due to the multiple early parliamentary elections in the past three years did not have the expected mobilizing effect. Of those who did not vote, 40% indicated a lack of trust in politics as their reason to abstain – almost double the EU average (Eurobarometer, 2024). Yet, Bulgaria was not the one with the lowest voter turnout, as Lithuania and Croatia registered the lowest figures at 28.97% and 21.35%, respectively.





Table 2: Bulgarian European Parliament election results (2007-2024)

Party	Positioning	EP group	2007		2009		2014		2019		2024	
			%	MEPs	%	MEPs	%	MEPs	%	MEPs	%	MEPs
GERB	Centrist populist	EPP	21.68	5	24.36	5	30.42	6	31.07	6	23.55	5
BSP	Left	S&D/PSE	21.41	5	18.5	4	18.93	4	24.26	5	7.01	2
DPS	Centre	Renew Europe/Alde	20.26	4	14.4	3	17.27	4	16.55	3	14.66	3
NDSV	Centrist populist	Alde	6.27	1	7.96	2						
PP-DB	Centrist populist, centre right	Renew Europe/EPP									14.45	3
DB, etc	Centre right	EPP	4.35	0	7.95	1	6.45	1	6.06	1		
ITN	Centrist populist	ECR									6.04	1
Vazrazhdane	Populist radical right	ESN									13.98	3
Ataka	Populist radical right	NA	14.2	3	11.96	2	2.96	0	1.07	0		
VMRO, etc	Populist radical right	ECR			2.25	0	10.66	2	7.36	2	2.09	0
NFSB	Populist radical right						3.05	0				
Voter turnout			28.6	18	37.49	17	35.84	17	32.64	17	33.78	17

Source: Central Electoral Commission: cik.bg

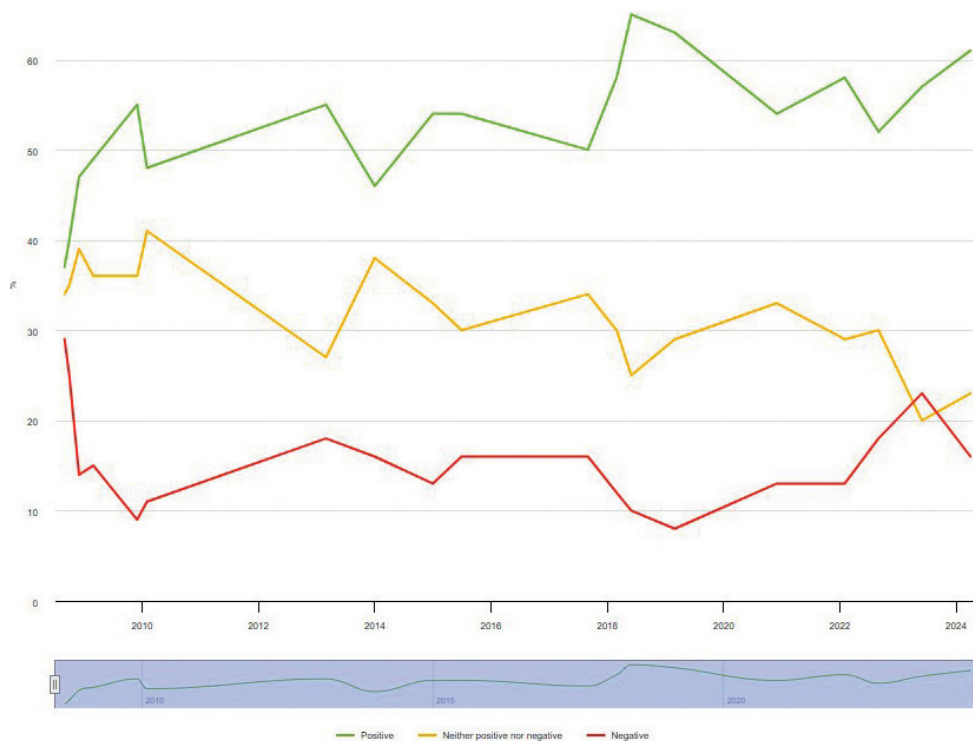
More importantly, the two-in-one elections significantly shifted the debate towards domestic issues. Opinion polls indicated corruption (59%), low income (57%), and healthcare (45%) to be the top three issues of voter concern (Alpha Research 2024a), while poverty and equality were singled out as the top priorities the EU should focus on (Trend 2024). Rising prices and increased cost of living (56%) along with the economic situation (53%) were the main motivators for Bulgarian voters – much more so than the EU average of 42% and 41%, respectively (Eurobarometer 2024).

In the context of six national legislative elections and a string of caretaker governments, the European debate was completely overshadowed by preoccupations over the composition of the future national parliament and the likelihood of forming a stable government. Even pressing topics such as expanding Schengen to land borders and joining the Eurozone remained in the background. The former coalition partners GERB and PP-DB, the two most pronouncedly pro-European parties in the country, were caught in political bickering and mutual accusations, failing to effectively articulate their priorities for the next European Parliament. In

the meantime, Vazrazhdane ran an aggressive anti-EU campaign with the slogan “Out of the EU and NATO”. Less Eurosceptic parties like ITN advocated for national sovereignty and energy security, opposing the European Green Deal and the closing of coal electric plants. The Green Deal is strongly criticized by Vazrazhdane as well. The war in Ukraine prominently featured in the campaign, dividing political parties over support for Ukraine (GERB, PP–DB, and DPS) vs. maintaining neutrality and spending the money on other priorities (BSP, Vazrazhdane and ITN). The division perfectly aligns with the anti-Russian and pro-Russian attitudes of the respective parties and their supporters – one of the key dividing issues in Bulgarian society for the past two centuries.

Although there was little debate about Europe, Bulgarian voters remain starkly pro-European, with over 60% approving EU membership and only 16% having negative attitudes (Figure 2), while 60% are optimistic about the future of Europe (Eurobarometer, 2024). A study by Trend further indicates that 41% of respondents think that Bulgaria has benefitted from EU membership, with free travel and EU funds being singled out as the top benefits (Trend, 2024). The same study found that 45% of respondents feel safer in the current geopolitical situation thanks to EU membership, and 41% think membership also contributes to greater economic and social stability.

Figure 2: Attitudes towards Bulgaria's membership in the EU



Source: Alpha Research: <https://alpharesearch.bg/monitoring/12/>



GERB convincingly won the 2024 European Parliament elections with 23.55% of the votes and five seats. Second came Dvizhenie za Prava i Svobodi (Movement for Rights and Freedoms, DPS) with 14.66% of the votes and three seats, closely followed by the PP–DB alliance, with 14.45% and the same number of seats, and Vazrazhdane (Revival) with 13.98% and also three seats. While pro-EU parties received the majority of the votes in the election, the results of Vazrazhdane and the increase of radical-right MEPs from 2 to 3 are a cause for great concern amidst an overall rise of the populist radical right in the European Parliament.

Similarly, GERB won the national elections with 24.7% of the votes, which made little difference in terms of forming a government. Parties in the fragmented and polarized parliament failed to agree on a governing formula, and subsequently, a seventh legislative election is scheduled for 27 October 2024. Early forecasts predict seven political formations in the subsequent parliament with little prospect for a governing coalition. In fact, 53% of voters do not believe that the new parliament will be able to produce a regular government (Alpha Research 2024b). Who benefits from yet another round of early elections, although, is Vazrazhdane who will have more opportunities to broadcast their pro-Russian, anti-EU and anti-NATO rhetoric and attract more disillusioned voters. Bulgaria's future remains uncertain – politically, economically and geostrategically.

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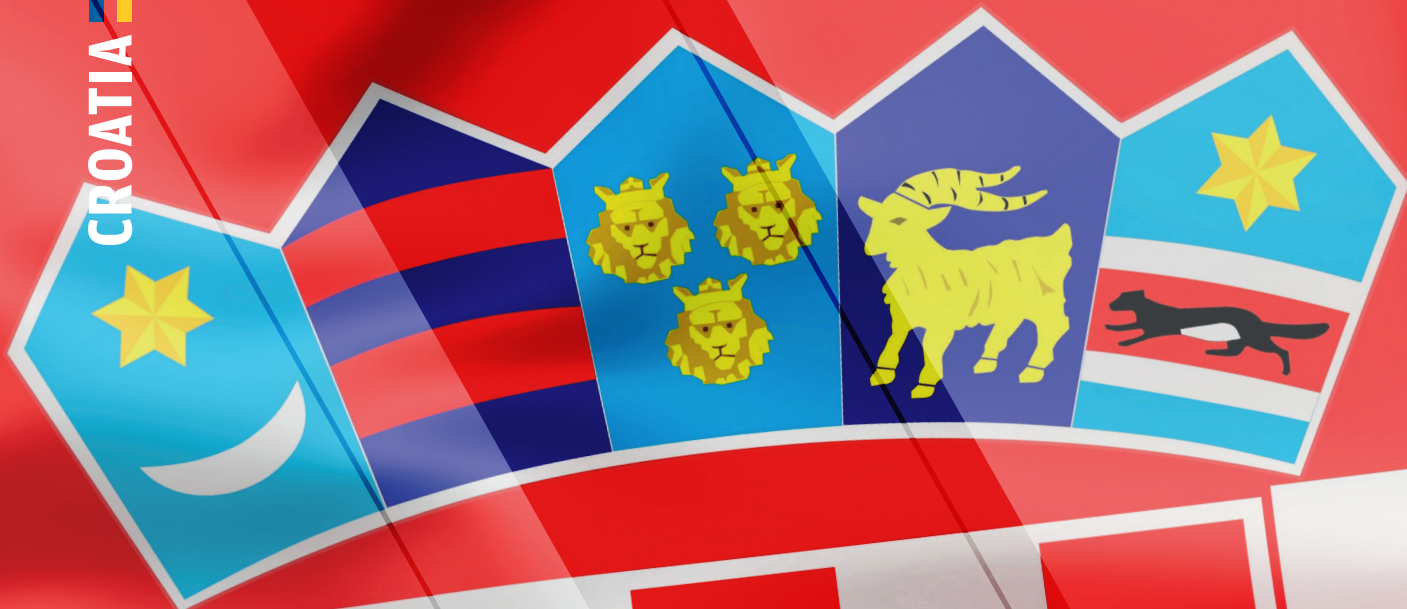
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CROATIA



# Between ‘Kingmakers’ and Public Indifference: Croatia’s National Conservative Right in the European Elections of 2024

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## Abstract

This chapter focuses on Croatia and deals with the national conservative Domovinski Pokret/Homeland Movement (DP) party. In the latest European elections, the DP garnered a percentage of 8.82% (65,383 votes and one seat), taking third spot after the ruling (centre-right) Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) and the ‘Rivers of Justice’ coalition spearheaded by the (centre-left) Social Democrat Party (SDP). I begin the present chapter by sketching a typology of the constituent segments along the broad spectrum of the European right wing and situate the DP within it. I then offer a summary of the DP’s founding principles vis-à-vis further European integration and clarify the extent to which these principles were reflected in the party’s stances and active engagement in the latest European elections. I then identify the main catalysts behind the DP leadership’s success in mobilizing target groups and galvanizing electoral support for the party.

**Keywords:** *Radical Right, National Conservatives, European Elections, Euroscepticism, Croatia, Ukraine*

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## Introduction

The results of the European elections (6–9 June 2024) have generated diverse political repercussions on the national, European and global levels. On the one hand, the parties of the centre-right, grouped under the European People's Party (EPP), and the parties of the centre-left, rallying behind the banner of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) group, succeeded in maintaining the top and the second spot, respectively, at the European level. On the other hand, the landscape became hazier concerning the political forces clustered along the broader right-wing spectrum beyond the EPP – namely, the parties of the *national conservative* as well as the *populist and radical right* in the European Parliament (EP).

One catalyst that has complicated the precise assessment of those parties' performance is that the political forces beyond the conservative centre-right were scattered among different coalitions such as the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and Identity and Democracy (ID) groups – also including powerful non-attached (NA) political actors including Hungary's Fidesz party. Nevertheless, it appears that these parties succeeded in one of three ways in the latest European elections. First, some consolidated their already preeminent positions in the domestic politics of their respective states, such as the National Rally (RN) in France, or enhanced their positions significantly, as in the case of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Germany, the Freedom Party (PVV) in the Netherlands, and the Law and Justice party (PiS) in Poland. A second set expanded and augmented, to varying degrees, their public appeal, including Vox in Spain, Chega in Portugal, and the Hellenic Solution (EL) in Greece. A third, smaller group saw their support erode due to the emergence of new contenders, most notably the ruling Fidesz party in Hungary, which has ceded popularity to the centre-right Respect and Freedom party (Tisza).

In Central and Southeast Europe, the voter turnout in the latest European elections ranged from relatively high (e.g., Hungary, 59.46%) to relatively low (e.g., Poland, 40.65%; Slovakia, 34.38%) and meagre (e.g., Lithuania, 28.35%) (European Parliament, n.d.). This article casts its lens on Croatia, one of the new member states where the turnout rate was the lowest in the EU (21.35%) (Ibid).

Despite the lack of voter interest, the EU is a significant benefactor for Croatia, which has been heavily dependent on financial support from Brussels since it joined

the Union in 2013. In particular, the EU's Structural and Cohesion Funds have been of crucial significance in upgrading the local infrastructure in the less-developed regions of the country (e.g., certain parts of Eastern Slavonia and Dalmatia). Moreover, especially following the country's accession to the Schengen Area (1 January 2023), employment opportunities within the EU have provided both 'white collar' and 'blue collar' professional categories with a vital 'lifeline'. As an aggregate of these sociopolitical realities, the primary concerns and expectations of the Croatian electorate during the latest European elections predominantly revolved around the economy, and public Euroscepticism was not noticeably high. At the same time, global and regional crises generated shockwaves within the Croatian public and among the country's political elites. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 is a particular case in point, with several political actors across the political divide seeking to draw tentative analogies between this weighty geopolitical moment and Croatia's *Domovinski Rat* ('Homeland War') from 1991 to 1995.

As a consequence of the *Domovinski Rat*, Croatia has several parties that oscillate between the categories of the radical and the extreme right. While formed between the early 1990s and the early 2000s, these parties – including the Croatian Party of Rights (HSP), the Croatian Pure Party of Rights (HČSP) and the Autochthonous Party of Rights (A-HSP) – tend to claim roots in the same nineteenth-century nationalist Hrvatska Stranka Prava or Croatian Party of Rights.

Nevertheless, since not one of these older parties has been represented either in the Croatian Sabor (national assembly) or the EP for longer than a decade, this article focuses on the national conservative party, the Domovinski Pokret (Homeland Movement, DP), which in the short period since its formation has become the most vocal opposition party of the right. In the 2024 European elections, the DP garnered 8.82% of the vote, taking one seat and securing the third spot after the ruling, centre-right Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) and the 'Rivers of Justice' coalition spearheaded by the centre-left Social Democrat Party (SDP) (Table 1). Launched on 29 February 2020, the DP has set its principal objective to antagonize the ruling HDZ from the right. This aim acquires a greater significance, considering that roughly one month earlier, under the leadership of Ivan Penava, the DP secured third place in the Croatian parliamentary elections (17 April 2024) with a percentage of 9.56%, taking 14 seats (Table 2). This result, in turn, upgraded the party's leverage in the negotiations for the formation of a new government after the elections and rendered the DP a 'kingmaker' until its official inclusion in the governing coalition with the HDZ in May 2024 (Tesija, 2024; Hajdari, 2024).



Table 1. Results of the 2024 European elections in Croatia

Parties and coalitions	Votes	Vote share (%)	Seats
<b>HDZ</b>	256,295	34.6	6
<b>Rivers of Justice</b>	192,314	25.9	4
<b>DP</b>	65,383	8.8	1
<b>Možemo</b>	43,890	5.9	1

Source: *Konacni Rezultati Izbora* (Republika Hrvatska, n.d.)

Table 2. Results of the 2024 parliamentary elections in Croatia

Parties and coalitions	Votes	Vote share (%)	Seats
<b>HDZ</b>	729,949	34.4	61
<b>Rivers of Justice</b>	538,748	25.4	42
<b>DP</b>	202,714	9.5	14
<b>Možemo</b>	193,051	9.1	10
<b>Most</b>	169,988	8	11
<b>Focus-Republic</b>	47,715	2.3	1
<b>Our Croatia</b>	47,655	2.3	2
<b>Independent Platform of the North</b>	25,830	1.2	2

Source: *Konacni Rezultati Izbora Zastupnika u Hrvatski Sabor 2024* (Republika Hrvatska, n.d.).

I begin the present chapter by sketching a typology of the constituent segments along the broad spectrum of the European right wing and situate the DP within it. I then offer a summary of the DP's founding principles vis-à-vis further European integration and clarify the extent to which these principles were reflected in the party's stances and active engagement in the latest European elections. I then identify the main catalysts behind the DP leadership's success in mobilizing target groups and galvanizing electoral support for the party.

## Situating the Homeland Movement within the European populist and radical right

This schematic categorization pays primary attention to political origins, evolutionary trajectories, and patterns of (active) political engagement (Petsinis, 2019: 166–167). Parties of the populist and radical right tend to scrutinize constitutional order while striving to promote their political cause(s) principally via parliamentary and democratic institutions and procedures. Populist and radical right-wing parties may often be by-products of top-level formation processes (so-called 'cadre' parties) that have come into being after (a) the reformation or merger of already existing parties, as with the Sweden Democrats (SD), the Finns

Party in Finland, and the Conservative People's Party (EKRE) in Estonia; or (b) the secession of 'splinter groups' from larger parties such as the cases of the Independent Greeks (ANEL) and, more recently, EL in Greece.

Attention must also be paid to one more subcategory of right-wing parties beyond the centre right – the *national conservatives*. The political platforms of such parties maintain ethnonationalist and nativist components, as well as occasional pledges to protect 'naturally ascribed' gender norms and religious values, but their populist and anti-establishment tones appear somewhat less intense. A few representative examples from Central and Eastern Europe are (to a certain extent) Fidesz in Hungary, PiS in Poland and the National Alliance in Latvia.

By contrast, parties of the extreme right may actively challenge (or even attempt to temporarily substitute) the operation of state institutions (e.g., by organizing party militias or youth wings into self-styled 'street patrols'). Such parties have usually come into being due to processes spearheaded by a grassroots nucleus often aided by semi-paramilitary groupings, therefore regularly opting for a more militant engagement. Parties of this subgroup with a non-negligible public appeal have become active across Central and Southeast Europe – notable cases during the last 10–15 years include the 'old' Jobbik in Hungary, 'Our Slovakia' (ĽSNS), Bulgaria's 'Ataka', and the Golden Dawn in Greece (Ellinas, 2015; Sygkelos, 2015; Drábik, 2022).

## **'Uncompromising opposition' from the right: Where does the Homeland Movement stand on the issues?**

As early as 2020, the DP leadership has set as top priorities: (a) safeguarding of national and Christian values; (b) stricter control of immigration and tougher 'law and order' measures, and; (c) revision of certain clauses in legislation protecting minority rights (Domovinski Pokret, 2020a). Regarding the ethnonationalist component of its political agenda, the party objects to the adoption of the 'fixed' quota arrangement toward the representation of ethnic minorities in the Sabor (i.e., the so-called 'electoral district 12'), the ethnic Serb minority in particular (Domovinski Pokret, 2020b: 32). In addition, DP contends that 'this arrangement has mostly enabled certain individuals and groups to serve their private interests' (Ibid.: 31) and calls for this model to be abolished (Ibid).



Regarding gender-related issues, DP pledges to 'respect and safeguard traditional family values' (Domovinski Pokret, 2020a: 2), whereas the full party manifesto defines 'marriage as the union between a man and a woman, as stipulated by the Constitution ... [T]his guideline must be respected by the Croatian institutions' (Domovinski Pokret, 2020b: 20). As far as the DP's nativist principles on immigration are concerned, the party holds that 'the protection of borders and citizens from potential threats must be assigned primarily to the authorities of sovereign states within the European Union' (Domovinski Pokret, 2020b: 29).

In their rhetoric, the leader Ivan Penava and other high-ranking members have regularly accused political opponents of 'incompetence and irresponsibility', including in attacks on the HDZ for its ongoing cooperation with the ethnic Serb Independent Democratic Party (SDSS) as well as the 'relentless promotion of pro-LGBT agendas and woke culture' by the SDP and above all the Green-left coalition of Možemo ('We Can!'). Nevertheless, the speed with which the current governing coalition between the HDZ and the DP was concluded and the relative flexibility with which any noteworthy obstacles were bypassed hint at a party ostensibly keener on engaging from within the halls of power instead of uncompromisingly opposing the mainstream establishment. Therefore, despite the occasional display of paraphernalia associated with the wartime fascist Ustaše ('Insurgents') regime (1941–1945) in public events co-ordinated by the DP (Hajdari, 2024; Novakov & Čolić, 2024), based on top-level decision-making and political values, the DP seems to fit more closely the prototype of a *national conservative* party. This observation is reinforced by the DP's joining the ECR group in the EP after the European elections.

## The Homeland Movement and the process of European integration

Soon after it was founded and against a backdrop of soft Euroscepticism and concerns over interethnic relations, the DP began expressing discontent with longstanding external pressures from the Venice Commission (Council of Europe) and the EU. This discontent centred on the pre-accession push (in 2000–2002) for Croatia to adopt the 'fixed' quota arrangement for ethnic minority representation in the Sabor (Domovinski Pokret, 2020b: 32).

On a macropolitical level, the soft Eurosceptic stance of the DP leadership is reflected in its framing of the European Union as 'a confederal union of sovereign

states and not as a supranational, federal, state with the prospects of becoming unitary' (Domovinski Pokret, 2020a: 3). Along the same lines, the DP prescribes that Croatia must develop closer relations with the Visegrad Four (Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic) because of 'the shared historical experiences, as well as the similar positions and outlooks on the European and global developments' with this group of countries (Domovinski Pokret, 2020b, p. 30). Herein, it should be underlined that, despite its soft Eurosceptic orientation, the DP never advocated for the development of more extensive relations between Croatia and 'alternative partners' in global politics, like Russia, China or the BRICS. In this light, the DP seems to align with the staunchly and idiosyncratically sovereigntist stances regarding relations with both the West and non-Western powers that characterize parties to the right of the HDZ in Croatian politics (Petsinis, 2024).

## Seizing the geopolitical moment: The Homeland Movement's reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine

The DP leadership has been quick to seize the geopolitical moment occasioned by Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Aligning with a more general tendency across Croatia's political divide, the party's leader, Ivan Penava, and other high-ranking members have drawn (at times oblique) links between the legacies of Croatia's *Domovinski Rat* (1991–1995) and Ukraine's struggle to resist Russian aggression.

On 24 February 2022, Penava stated, 'Our party expresses its firm solidarity with Ukraine and the Ukrainian people ... we hope that this conflict will last as shortly as possible with as few human and material losses as possible' (Ibid.). He also urged the state authorities to organize the accommodation of Ukrainian refugees in Croatia and efficiently allocate the material resources required. In addition to highlighting the commonalities between the Homeland War and the developments in Ukraine, Penava cast doubts on the competence of the government to manage a migration crisis in Croatia (Ibid.). More emphatically, on 6 April 2022, the party's MP Stipo Mlinarić praised Volodymyr Zelenskyy for dealing with the 'fifth column' in Ukraine and deplored the fact that 'the HDZ-led government has not done the same with the 'fifth column' that operates from within the Serb Democratic Independent Party' (Domovinski Pokret, 2022b).





Nevertheless, between Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 and the end of 2023, the DP suffered a plateauing, if not a significant decline, in its popularity vis-à-vis the HDZ and other minor contenders on the right. As indicated in several public surveys conducted by the Promocija Plus, 2X1 Komunikacije and Ipsos polling agencies between March and December 2022, the DP had been lagging behind both Možemo and the centre-right, conservative Most ('The Bridge') party (Europe Elects, 2024). Therefore, to reverse this decline in popularity, the DP started putting greater stress on the rapidly increasing cost of living and the government's alleged incompetence in dealing with galloping inflation (Domovinski Pokret, 2022c).

Due to this change of course and the party's gradual adoption of a strategy more focused on domestic policy, which persisted until the Croatian parliamentary and the European elections, no extensive or concrete references were made to the war in Ukraine. On the contrary, the DP's *Ustani i Ostani!* ('Stand Up and Remain!') political program, which the party launched for both the national and the European elections, cites Ukraine only on one occasion: in the section about national defence and the need to upgrade the equipment of the Croatian armed forces – the navy, in particular. In greater detail, the program stresses that: 'Ukraine demonstrated how the use of new military technologies, such as drones, can paralyse even the naval forces of global superpowers (namely, Russia)' (Domovinski Pokret, 2024a: 23). Otherwise, any references by DP to the EU during its campaign for the European elections concentrated on more general aspects of European politics in accordance with the party's founding principles regarding the process of European integration.

## The Homeland Movement's campaign in the 2024 European elections

Right at the beginning of the *Ustani i Ostani!* policy document, the DP underlines its fundamental stance on state sovereignty within the EU:

Many types of crises during the last years (e.g., the financial crisis, Brexit, the migration crisis, and the COVID-19 crisis) have demonstrated that the EU reacts in a slow and non-coordinated manner whereas, at the same time and under these irregular circumstances, the member states prioritize their own interests exclusively. This is why Croatia must prioritize its own interests, too (Croatia comes first!). (Domovinski Pokret, 2024a: 26)

At a later point in the same policy document, the DP leadership reiterates that it is a sovereigntist party which primarily views the EU as ‘a community of equal and sovereign states and nations rooted in Christian foundations and principles ... the detachment of the EU from its Christian roots has resulted in great identity confusion’ (Ibid). Furthermore, the party contends that ‘decisions about Croatia should be taken by Croatian politicians in Zagreb and not by Brussels-based officials’ (Ibid). With specific regard to the area of national defence and the prospects for the EU’s strategic autonomy, DP holds that any projects designed to bolster EU defence policy must not be misused by Brussels in order to weaken further the sovereignty of nation-states (Domovinski Pokret, 2024a: 26).

In addition, DP adamantly opposes Serbia’s accession to the EU, in no small part due to the legacies of the wars of the 1990s in which Serbia is seen as the aggressor against Croatia. Contrarywise, the party underlines that ‘the things that Croatia must demand without compromise from Serbia, which committed aggression on Croatian territory, are payment of war reparations, a thorough search for disappeared persons, and the return of cultural treasures that were stolen during the war’ (Domovinski Pokret, 2024a: 28). At the same time, the party accuses the Serbian government of ‘promoting the ideology of Greater Serbia and openly endorsing Russian aggression against Ukraine’ (Ibid).

Apart from *Ustani i Ostani!*, individual MPs reiterated these standpoints concerning major policymaking areas on the EU level, both in the Croatian and the European Parliaments, on numerous occasions. Regarding immigration, in the aftermath of a knife attack in Mannheim, Germany, in May 2024, Ivo Čaleta-Car, a DP deputy in the Sabor, warned in a speech that:

The EU is slowly turning into a unitary supranational state. The EU is trying to create an unnatural federation of states that will be held together by migrants and their descendants through mixing with the indigenous populations. (Domovinski Pokret, 2024b)

In the same speech, he stressed: ‘Yes to the EU as a community of sovereign nations! No to the EU as a superstate!’ (Ibid.). Moreover, DP concisely but effectively publicized and summarized its main standpoints on European politics through the party’s official pages on social media (e.g., X and Instagram). On the party’s Instagram page, for instance, its main slogans for the European elections feature as follows:



'Croatia comes first!', 'We stop the extension of the Brussels jurisdiction!', 'For a counteraction to the globalist agendas!', 'No to the propagation of gender ideology! We do not want gender ideology in our schools!', 'For the protection of national borders!', 'For the demographic rebirth of Croatia and Europe!', 'Rebirth of the village for the rebirth of Croatia and Europe!', 'For a Europe that respects its Christian foundations!' (Domovinski Pokret, 2024c)

Here, it should be noted that several party candidates incorporated slogans related to policies on the EU level into their campaigns for both the national and the European elections. Stipe Mlinarić, for instance, reiterated that 'Serbia cannot join the EU before it pays Croatia war reparations for the villages and towns that it destroyed' (Domovinski Pokret, 2024d). Meanwhile, other party candidates pledged to fight for 'a Europe that respects its Christian foundations' (Domovinski Pokret, 2024e), reiterated that 'Croatia must retain its sovereignty in Europe' (Domovinski Pokret, 2024f), and underlined that 'Christianity is the foundation of the EU' (Domovinski Pokret, 2024g).

## **Embedding the European in the national: A contextual analysis of the Homeland Movement's political strategy in the European elections of 2024**

With a turnout rate of 21.35%, Croatia had the lowest voter participation among all EU member states in the most recent European elections. Croatians' lack of interest is underscored if we compare this turnout with the much higher rate of 62.30% in the Croatian parliamentary elections that took place on 17 April 2024 (Republika Hrvatska, n.d.). With European elections held shortly after the parliamentary ones, it is clear that Croatia's major political leaders prioritized the latter. This was especially true for DP, which emerged as a 'kingmaker' after the national elections. Faced with a choice between continuing its role as a perennial gadfly berating the HDZ establishment from opposition or seeking real power on the inside, DP leader Ivan Penava chose the latter, aligning his party with the HDZ and joining it in a governing coalition.

Considering the relatively more 'parochial' outlook of the Croatian electorate on global and European politics, the DP's leadership has since 2020 been rather

eclectic and places primary stress on those developments that, due to sociocultural catalysts, might resonate more directly with the ‘collective subconscious’ of the party’s target groups. This appears to have been a fairly commonplace practice for right-wing political actors in Croatia. For instance, between 2018 and 2019 (two years prior to the formation of the DP), the ‘right-wing faction’ within the ruling HDZ extensively capitalized on public grievances vis-à-vis the guidelines of the ‘Istanbul Convention’ for LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality (Milekic, 2018). Along comparable lines, the DP sought to capitalize on the shockwaves that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine generated across Croatian society by drawing tentative links between Ukrainian resistance and the Croatian Domovinski Rat in the 1990s. However, after 2023, the party leadership switched to a more domestic-focused strategy, emphasizing the rapidly increasing cost of living and Croatia’s galloping inflation as part of the endeavour to reverse its declining popularity.

Consequently, in its political program and the individual campaigns of its candidates and the party’s social media, the DP adopted an even more eclectic pattern of engagement for the European elections that consisted of (a) frequent and repetitive use of ‘catchphrase’ slogans (e.g., ‘Croatia comes first!’) and (b) a paramount, yet synoptic, stress on these aspects of European politics that resonated the most with the party’s founding principles and the dominant trends on identity politics among its target groups in the electorate. Therefore, primary importance was placed on (a) the purported need to safeguard Croatia’s state sovereignty from any extension of the EU’s jurisdiction; (b) calls to veto Serbia’s accession to the EU; (c) opposition to the alleged propagation of ‘gender ideology’ and counter-proposals in increase birthrates in Croatia and the rest of Europe, and; (d) the effective protection of national borders and stricter regulation of immigration from ‘third’ countries outside of Europe.

In the long run, it appears that this more eclectic strategy, which prioritized the embedment of the *European* in the *national*, facilitated the DP’s galvanizing of the *groupness* of its electorate, especially in the strongholds of Eastern and Western Slavonia (i.e., the IV. and V. electoral districts) and claim the third spot behind the HDZ and the SDP (but ahead of Most and Možemo) in both the parliamentary and European elections. Slavonia, as a whole, is a region that was heavily scarred by protracted warfare during the first half of the 1990s. In particular, Vukovar, an Eastern Slavonian town on the border with Serbia along the western bank of the Danube, has been established as a ‘master symbol’ of resistance to the Yugoslav People’s Army (JNA) in Croatian nationalist imagery. Most importantly, Vukovar



is the town of which Ivan Penava has been the local mayor since 2014. The long-term evolution of the HDZ–DP coalition will demonstrate whether the party leadership is keener on (a) alleviating its stances on Euroscepticism and identity politics to secure its status more firmly inside the halls of power or (b) seeking a 'new' pact with the ideologically compatible 'right-wing faction' within the ruling HDZ in an attempt to trigger a more decisive swing of the governing coalition towards the right.

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CYPRUS



# Rising discontent with the EU, the Rise of the Right and the 2024 European Parliament Elections in Cyprus

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## Abstract

The objective of this chapter is to discuss the causes of rising discontent in Cyprus and assess the political outcomes. Within this framework we briefly evaluate how the EU has dealt with various crises in the last few years. Perceptions in Cyprus about the EU have changed over time. In the 9 June European elections, a member of the extreme right-wing party, National People's Front (Ethniko Laiko Metopo, ELAM), was elected for the first time to the European Parliament. Understanding the circumstances in Cyprus that have gradually led to disillusionment with the national political system and the EU is essential to making sense of these developments.

*Keywords:* Cyprus; extreme right; economic crisis; voter disillusionment; European elections

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## Introduction

Undoubtedly, the EU currently faces multiple challenges. In addition to Euroscepticism, we are also faced with populism, which at times may lead to dangerous outcomes (Katsambekis, 2014). Yet, despite much criticism on multiple themes, the EU remains one of, if not the most desirable places in the world to live. The objective of this chapter is to discuss the causes of rising discontent in Cyprus and the political outcomes. Within this framework we briefly refer to how the EU dealt with some of the crises in the last few years.

Perceptions of the EU in Cyprus have changed over time. It is essential to understand the circumstances in this island state that have gradually led to disillusionment with the Cypriot political system and the EU. This disillusionment is one of the reasons that has led to the rise of populist trends across all Cypriot parties. Through recourse to populism, parties across the political spectrum have attempted to get closer to voters. For the purposes of this chapter, we will be focusing essentially on the case of rising right-wing rhetoric.

When Cyprus applied for membership in the EU on 4 July 1990, there were very high expectations. The principal perception was that the EU institutions and value system would eventually contribute to the termination of the occupation of the northern part of Cyprus and to a just solution to the problem. At the same time, there were high expectations regarding socioeconomic modernization and a new era. According to polls taken during the accession negotiations, Cyprus had the most favourable attitude towards the EU.

Eventually, these perceptions gradually changed, with the initial optimism fading (Katsourides, 2014). Indeed, retrospectively, Cypriots now view their initial perceptions as illusions. There were some specific issues which led to these changes. During the negotiations to resolve the Cyprus problem, which coincided with the period leading to accession, pressures were exerted on the Greek Cypriot side by the United Nations (UN), the United States and the United Kingdom, the former colonial power on the island. The EU more or less followed their lead. When Professor Shlomo Avineri of the University of Jerusalem and Ex-Director General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Israel read the UN's Annan Plan, he noted that it amounted to 'the favourite occupation of the EU and the UN' (Avineri, 2004). Yet, the Greek Cypriots were demonized for rejecting this plan.

It is instructive to compare and contrast the EU stance towards Russia and Turkey. Although by definition each case is unique, there are also some common characteristics. In both cases, there have been violations of international law. When Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022, there was a strong reaction on the part of the West. As Theophanous (2023: 205) notes: ‘The response of the EU was firm and punitive’. Russia soon became the most sanctioned country in the world, while Ukraine has received massive economic and military aid. ‘In the case of Cyprus, however’, Theophanous further reminds us, ‘Turkey has been tolerated and accommodated. This is because Russia is considered a foe, while Turkey is perceived as a strategic partner’ (Ibid.).

In the case of Cyprus, the West (including the EU) has more or less adjusted to the *fait accompli* created by Turkey’s occupation of 37% of the territory of Cyprus. The West (including the EU) tolerates this occupation and its entailing colonization and Islamization, the usurpation of Greek Cypriot properties in the north, as well as its systematic violations of the Cypriot exclusive economic zone (EEZ) by Turkey. In addition, the EU has not made economic aid to the Turkish Cypriots conditional, which would incentivize co-operation. Understandably, Greek Cypriots are not pleased with these policies and practices. As a result, the way the EU is perceived has changed in the eyes of most Cypriots.

When Cyprus faced a significant economic crisis in 2013, the EU’s treatment was rather punitive and irrational. There is no doubt that there was a need for a major restructuring of the Cypriot economy. However, the way it was promoted unnecessarily entailed a huge socioeconomic cost.

These developments, coupled with the ongoing economic turmoil caused by rising inflation, have made Cypriot voters susceptible to populist rhetoric. These conditions made the far-right and anti-systemic rhetoric of the National People’s Front (Ethniko Laiko Metopo, ELAM) appear as a viable way out of the crises for some voters. Others turn to ELAM as a form of protest against the current political system (Knews Kathimerini, 2023). This is demonstrated through ELAM’s electoral success at the 2024 European elections, where the party, which was founded in 2008, managed to secure its first seat in the European Parliament.





## The historical context of right-wing politics in Cyprus

Right-wing politics in Cyprus has a long and complex history, deeply intertwined with the island's political and social developments (Charalambous, 2018). The roots of right-wing ideology can be traced back to the early twentieth century, during the struggle against British colonial rule and the pursuit of enosis (union with Greece). This period saw the rise of nationalist sentiments and the establishment of right-wing political organizations such as the National Organization of Cypriot Fighters (EOKA), which played a significant role in the anti-colonial movement and Cyprus' subsequent independence from Britain in 1960.

Following independence, right-wing politics continued to be influential. This trend persisted after the Turkish invasion of 1974 as well. In 1976 the Democratic Rally (DISY) was founded and gradually emerged as a major political force. It has long advocated a market-oriented economy, closer ties with the West and a pragmatic stance on the Cyprus issue. Over time, however, the political landscape began to shift, particularly in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis and the Eurozone crisis that followed. These economic challenges, which entailed high unemployment rates, austerity measures and corruption, fuelled public discontent and created fertile ground for the resurgence of far-right rhetoric (Katsourides, 2014).

Most Cypriots believe that the EU did not treat Cyprus rationally and with solidarity when the country found itself in a difficult economic condition in 2013. The Cypriot economic crisis had both endogenous and exogenous causes. Cyprus' treatment by the Troika – the European Commission, the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) – was harsh and punitive. Several politicians and analysts indicated that Cyprus was used as a guinea pig (Žižek, 2014). Many Cypriots feel that it is doubtful whether the Troika would have treated a Catholic or a Protestant country in the same way as Cyprus and Greece were treated. In the process the Cypriot banking system was in essence destroyed. Currently, the banking system essentially belongs to foreign capital. Furthermore, the cost of services has increased while quality has declined. Cyprus Airways closed down, with foreign carriers taking over its routes. Inequality grew and the Cypriot economic structure changed. Despite the Troika, Cyprus recovered, albeit at a high socioeconomic cost (Theophanous, 2018). Cypriots also feel that the EU is currently not exhibiting adequate solidarity in relation to the immigration crisis. Cyprus is the top EU country in terms of per capita asylum applications.

Inevitably, these issues have led to Euroscepticism and discontent concerning the EU. At the same time, critics feel that the mainstream political parties have not successfully addressed the significant challenges Cyprus faces. Discontent with the Cypriot political system has been growing, given that there have been serious incidents of corruption on several occasions, and the country has failed to cope successfully with multiple challenges.

Considering all these factors, it is hardly surprising that voter turnout has declined as more and more Cypriots disengage from politics. At the same time, according to polls and actual election results, ELAM's public support has been growing. It could be said that many of those who support it are expressing a protest on the one hand and a warning on the other. These voters are part of a broader trend of far-right populism gaining traction across Europe, driven by economic insecurities, cultural anxieties and disillusionment with mainstream politics. Despite its radical positions, ELAM has managed to integrate into the political mainstream to some extent, collaborating with other parties on specific issues while maintaining its distinct far-right identity. For example, Annita Demetriou (DISY), the president of Cyprus' parliament, was elected thanks to the votes of the MPs of ELAM and another small centrist party, Democratic Alignment (DiPa), who voted with her party. The historical presence of right-wing politics in Cyprus and the contemporary rise of ELAM illustrate the dynamic and evolving nature of political ideologies on the island, shaped by historical legacies and current sociopolitical challenges.

## The political context of the 2024 European Parliament elections

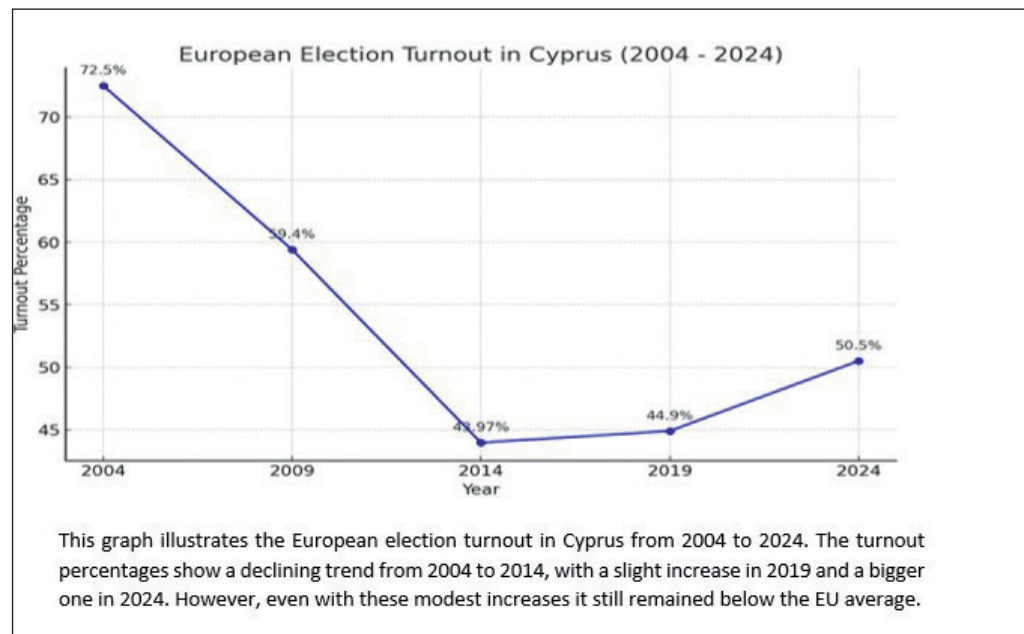
When a country faces occupation, existential issues, difficult socioeconomic conditions, corruption, high immigration flows and identity issues and the political system cannot respond adequately, extreme tendencies at some point become inevitable. Even before the European parliamentary election results were announced, there was a widespread belief that the political system required much improvement. Thus, the rise of right-wing rhetoric, especially in the case of Cyprus, did not come as a surprise, and its representation in the European Parliament was expected.

Furthermore, even though two elections were held concurrently on 9 June 2024 – for the European Parliament and local government – the voter turnout was dismally low at 50.5% (Philenews, 2024). The low turnout rates indicate the



disillusionment of the Cypriot electorate towards both national and European politics. It is worth noting that the Cypriot electorate has never demonstrated particularly high levels of engagement with European politics, which has fallen even lower since the Eurozone crisis in 2013 (see Figure 1). As mentioned earlier, its significant social impact on Cyprus seemed to alter citizens' views towards the EU during this period (Katsourides, 2013).

Figure 1. European election turnout in Cyprus (2004-2024)



Source: prepared by the authors who utilized published data of the European election results (European Parliament, 2024)

In recent years, voters have repeatedly warned the political system in various ways, but the response has not been satisfactory. As mentioned earlier, the EU's stance on several issues has been inadequate, requiring member states to pick up the slack in many instances, such as on the issue of asylum seekers. Even before the 2024 elections, the political system and the three major political parties – DISY, the Democratic Party (DIKO) and the Progressive Party of Working People (AKEL) – faced crisis and our brief overview shows there were already plenty of warning signs (Theophanous, 2024a; Theophanous, 2024b; Theophanous, 2024c). Citizens also gave politicians many warnings and opportunities to change course. Because they did not see any real change, their messages were much stronger at the 9 June elections. It would not be an exaggeration to describe the results (the election of an extreme right-wing candidate and an independent candidate with no prior political experience) as a political earthquake.

It should be noted that, firstly, during the European election campaign, there was not much discussion on the challenges facing the EU or the candidates' positions. Most notably, Fidias Panayiotou, the independent candidate with no background in politics or social issues, made it clear in his pre-election campaign that he had yet to formulate any political opinions on matters such as the Cyprus question or the role of the EU. Nor was there any discussion of the role of Cyprus in the European project (Theophanous, 2024e). Secondly, a vital objective of the local government reform preceding the June elections was to reduce the cost of running it. However, fears have already been expressed that there will probably be an increase in costs. This has further deepened the grievances of the Cypriot electorate with the current political system and the parties responsible for this reform. The disillusionment of the electorate and their preference for 'apolitical politics' was also evident in the latest presidential elections in Cyprus, where the incumbent president, Nikos Christodoulides, won even though he focused more on his public image than on policies to address fundamental issues. This strategy proved highly successful as it enabled him to stand apart from the established political parties of the island, which Cypriot citizens have long accused of corruption (Triga et al., 2023).

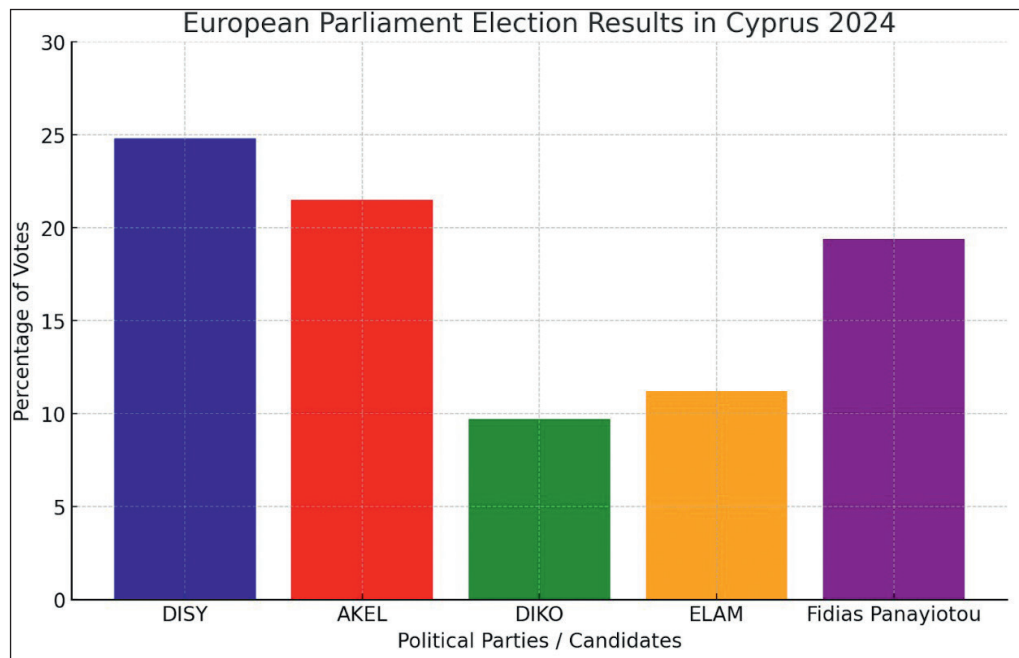
## The results of the 2024 European elections

It is also important to assess the election results, even if only briefly, concerning the performance of the political parties. A brief introduction of the main political parties of Cyprus – DISY, DIKO and AKEL – is thus necessary. DISY is a Christian Democratic party with a liberal–conservative ideology, while DIKO is a nationalist–centrist political party, and AKEL is Cyprus' communist party.

In June, DISY recorded its lowest percentage vote share ever (24.8%). Despite the decline in support, it was the party that paid the smallest price. Furthermore, while it may not have had satisfactory results in the local government elections, retaining the two seats in the European Parliament was a tremendous boon.



Figure 2. European Parliament election results in Cyprus (2024)



Source: prepared by the authors who have utilized the published data of the 2024 European Elections (Ministry of the Interior, 2024)

After losing three presidential elections and considering the difficult socioeconomic conditions, one would have expected AKEL to recover and present itself as a leading force. This did not happen. Despite the relatively positive performance in the local government elections, the result for the European elections (21.5%) and the loss of one seat constitute a major defeat for the party. Obviously, the causes of this result run deeper than the election campaign. AKEL's leadership should, among other things, ask itself why citizens expressed their disdain for the current state of political affairs by supporting a candidate without a political background and concrete policy proposals, among other candidates, rather than the largest opposition party.

Inevitably, its showing (9.7% of the vote) was also a defeat for DIKO, even though it retained its seat in the European Parliament. The fact that the party's share fell below 10% while ELAM surpassed it which contains both substantive and symbolic messages. We should recall that one of DIKO's campaign slogans was 'vote DIKO for effective governance'. Obviously, the electorate did not respond. Nor is it a coincidence that the other two parties that supported President Nicos Christodoulides also saw their electoral strength decline.

During the election campaign, one of the top priorities of almost all parties was the need to contain ELAM. Nevertheless, ELAM continued to grow, securing a



double-digit share of the vote (11.2%), surpassing DIKO and securing one EP seat. The political system should also ask itself what would have happened to ELAM's percentage if not for the candidacy of the independent, Fidas Panayiotou, who gained 19.4% of the votes.

One of the most important advantages of ELAM is its ability to resonate strongly with younger voters, something the traditional parties have been struggling to do. Indeed, ELAM's voter base is disproportionately made up of young male voters (Knews Kathimerini, 2023). ELAM's strength, much like Fidas Panayiotou's, came from its ability to mobilize younger voters who failed to show up in large numbers in previous elections. However, unlike ELAM, Panayiotou did not present any specific policy positions. From this observation, we can see how Cyprus' political system has cultivated an apolitical mentality, fostering a climate for the advent and strengthening of populism (Theophanous, 2024d). Panayiotou took advantage of this state of affairs – the disdain and disappointment of thousands of citizens, especially young people – to secure a seat in the European Parliament.

Obviously, there is an urgent need to redefine the political system and public life in Cyprus. The parties and the political system should take stock of recent developments and look for new ideas, novel approaches and fresh faces. Cyprus and its people are facing serious challenges. It is crucial to get politics back on track.

## The National People's Front's appeal and political trajectory

As touched on above, ELAM was founded in 2008 as the Cypriot sister party of the Golden Dawn, a neo-Nazi party in Greece. The group that founded the party sought to register it under the same name (Golden Dawn), but the authorities denied this request (Charalambous and Christoforou, 2018; Katsourides, 2013). ELAM, however, passed through a transitional period, during which it shaped a new public face in the political landscape, escaping from the shadow of Golden Dawn. What prompted and necessitated this change was the fact that Golden Dawn and its leaders were convicted and imprisoned for operating a criminal organization that was tied to murder and criminal violence. In addition, in an attempt to become accepted as part of the Cypriot political system and cast off its image as an extremist organization, ELAM proceeded to distance itself from other extreme European right-wing parties and organizations – such as the National



Democratic Party (NPD) in Germany, Forza Nuova in Italy, and the Movement Against Illegal Immigration (DPNI) in Russia – with which they had previously advertised their close ties. ELAM, for example, ensured that links to the websites of the above European parties were deleted from its website. In addition, it removed all documents and text it shared with the Golden Dawn website.

ELAM's political positions have relied on principles and policies adopted by both parties on the left and right. Their practices were determined by both ideological and tactical motives. In its early steps, it appeared increasingly difficult for ELAM to make a breakthrough in the Cypriot political scene as its program transcended mainstream party politics. In addition to the Cyprus problem, the advent of the economic crisis of 2011 and the austerity measures imposed by the Troika in 2013, along with the severe budget cuts, the 'haircut' uninsured depositors had to take on balances above €100,000, as well as political corruption, gave ELAM the opportunity to establish itself as a legitimate political force. It could do so because, unlike the traditional parties deemed responsible for such crises, ELAM was a novel political force untarnished by corruption at the time. It could thus enter the political scene as the new political force that would hold traditional parties accountable.

All of ELAM's policies have the underlying principle of protecting the Greek Cypriots. ELAM narrowly identifies the issues to be addressed by and for the Greek Cypriots (mostly the Turkish occupation of the northern part of Cyprus, the neoliberal policies of the EU and illegal immigration). Identifying explicit threats against the interests of the Greek Cypriots enables ELAM to propose clear solutions (regardless of whether they are pragmatic or not). This simplicity of ELAM's discourse seems to appeal to many voters. The success of this discourse is reflected in the gradual and steady rise in ELAM's votes from 663 votes in the 2009 European Parliament elections to 4,056 in the Cyprus parliamentary elections of 2011, 13,040 in 2016 and 24,255 in May 2021, becoming the fourth largest party on the island. During the 2024 European Parliament elections, ELAM secured its first seat in the European Parliament with 41,215 votes (Cyprus Mail, 2024). Currently, ELAM is the third-largest party on the island.

ELAM promotes a narrative emphasizing support for families, youth, vulnerable populations, low-income workers, and pensioners, proposing measures to aid these groups (Chatzistylianou, 2019). Within this framework, it often contrasts this support with the assistance given to Turkish Cypriots, migrants and asylum seekers,

advocating for policies favouring native Greeks.

Although ELAM criticizes other political parties as corrupt and accountable for the country's problems, its anti-establishment stance becomes ambiguous following its entry into the House of Representatives in 2016. It has co-operated with the ruling Democratic Rally to pass budgets and, as mentioned, elect the president of the parliament in 2021. In a political landscape where mainstream parties, including DISY, adopt anti-immigration stances, ELAM distinguishes itself as the authentic representative of these views.

ELAM supports left-wing economic policies aimed at wealth redistribution and increased state intervention in market regulation. It advocates for social protection measures, reduced business taxes in rural areas, incentives for technology and innovation, and various forms of business support.

The economic crisis which started in 2008 and the COVID-19 pandemic provided ELAM with opportunities to develop its strategy, focusing on aiding those in need while distinguishing between natives and non-natives. The party's approach involves reallocating state aid from migrants and asylum seekers to native Greeks, thereby positioning itself as a champion of vulnerable groups (Charalambous & Christoforou, 2018). This strategy helped ELAM differentiate itself from other populist parties, as it capitalized on the public's discontent with systemic parties blamed for the crises, allowing ELAM to emerge as a perceived saviour.

## Concluding remarks

The rise of right-wing rhetoric in Cyprus, exemplified by the success of ELAM, reflects broader regional and global trends of populist movements. The fact that the EU has been unable to respond effectively to pressing issues plaguing the Union (immigration and economic crises as well as the war in Ukraine) allowed for the rampant spread of Euroscepticism. Cypriot citizens have an additional reason for their Eurosceptic attitude as their expectations of the EU regarding the Cyprus problem have not been met. Inevitably, many citizens adopted the Eurosceptic stance of ELAM. In addition, the failure of the Cypriot political system and the mainstream parties to effectively address issues has been a significant factor in the rise of ELAM.

This article has traced the historical roots and contemporary dynamics of right-



wing politics in Cyprus, highlighting that the support for such ideologies is deeply embedded in the country's political history. Indeed, it can even be argued that if the extreme right were not associated with the disaster of 1974, perhaps its support would have been even higher. The recent electoral success of ELAM underscores the urgent need for the political system to address the underlying causes of this trend and redefine its approach to public life and governance. Likewise, it is essential to assess how this climate of discontent can be ameliorated both in the EU as a whole and in the member states.

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CZECH REPUBLIC



# The Race of Populists: The 2024 EP Elections in the Czech Republic

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## Abstract

The chapter analyses the performance of populist political parties in the 2024 EP election in the Czech Republic. The election ended with a significant increase in support for several populist parties: Action of Dissatisfied Citizens, Freedom and Direct Democracy and the Oath and Motorists. All populist parties used radical-right rhetoric before the election, expressing different levels of criticism of the European Union, strong anti-immigration attitudes and negative attitudes toward the Green Deal. The preliminary data show that the electoral support for the populists was based on a higher level of mobilization in so-called peripheral areas of the Czech Republic, potentially affected by recent inflation and austerity policies pursued by the government. All in all, the 2024 EP election in Czechia significantly increased support for populist political parties.

**Keywords:** *populism; Czech Republic; Euroscepticism; far right; radical right*

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## Introduction

The EP election took place three years into the Czech Republic's four-year parliamentary electoral cycle, making it an important test of support for both governing parties and the populist opposition. After the 2021 general elections, five political parties built two electoral coalitions, both of which advanced an anti-populist platform: the right-wing Spolu (Together) and the centrist coalition between the Pirates party and Mayors and Independents (Starostové a Nezávislí, STAN). They agreed to form a new government, effectively ending eight years of governments with a significant populist presence.

Yet populists made a comeback in the 2024 EP election. The campaign leading up to the 9 June polls was dominated by the issues of immigration and the European Green Deal, and all the populist parties tried to frame the election as a referendum on the incumbent government's performance. Historically, in line with the second-order elections theory (Reif & Schmitt, 1980), Czech voters have often taken elections as an opportunity to punish the government by voting for the parliamentary opposition or even for new political parties (Charvát & Maškarinec, 2020). The 2024 election did not depart from this trend, and populist parties came out on top: besides two 'established' populist parties – Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO) and Freedom and Direct Democracy (Svoboda a Přímá Demokracie, SPD) – the electoral coalition of the populist 'Přísaha a Motoristé' (Oath and Motorists, AUTO) gained representation in the European Parliament. While many voters may have voted for populist parties out of frustration with national politics and the incumbent government's performance (Mahdalová & Škop, 2024), the message to the European Parliament from the Czech Republic is unequivocal: populist voices are stronger and more radical than ever before.

## Background

Similarly to other European countries, the Czech Republic has witnessed a proliferation of populist political parties over the past 15 years. This expansion has been precipitated by the 2008 economic crisis and a series of political scandals, which have resulted in a decline in support for the established political parties (Havlík, 2015). The largest populist party, consistently polling around 30% of the

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vote, is ANO, founded in 2011 and led by the billionaire industrialist Andrej Babiš. The party is typically characterized as a technocratic or centrist populist party lacking clearly defined ideological foundations. The party initially gained traction by appealing to voters through an emphasis on communicating expertise and the ability to run the state effectively while blaming the established political parties for incompetency and corruption (Havlík, 2019). However, it has recently shifted both rhetorically and electorally towards the economic centre-left combined with nativist and authoritarian attitudes, moving closer to the programmatic formula typical for other far-right political parties in contemporary Europe (De Lange, 2007).

ANO initially became part of the coalition government in 2013 as a junior partner to the Social Democrats (SPD) and the Christian Democrats. Following the 2017 election, it became the leading government party in a minority coalition with the SD, which was supported for the majority of the term by the communists (Komunistická Strana Čech a Moravy, KSČM). After the 2021 general election, ANO assumed the role of the leading opposition party. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the party adopted a stance of ambivalent support for Kyiv while simultaneously advancing a criticism of Ukrainian policies as well as welfare-chauvinist arguments (i.e., the idea that welfare benefits and social services should be reserved primarily or exclusively for the native population of a country, rather than being extended to immigrants or non-citizens) (Havlík & Kluknavská, 2023). Additionally, it has taken a pro-Israel stance during the Israel– Hamas conflict.

Concerning its position towards the EU and EU policies, ANO has shifted from a mildly pro-European stance (Havlík & Kaniok, 2016) towards soft Euroscepticism over time. Initially, the party defended Czechia's membership of the EU, and Babiš even offered lukewarm support for the country adopting the euro. Subsequently, ANO began to emphasize the need to safeguard Czech national sovereignty vis-à-vis the EU, utilizing anti-elitist populist rhetoric targeting 'European elites' and attributing the EU's ineffectiveness in migration policy to incompetence in Brussels. The party's stance towards the EU became increasingly aligned with that of populist radical-right parties in other EU member states.

In its manifesto for the 2024 European Parliament election, ANO adopted a clear intergovernmentalist position, presented in a populist manner. It called for the 'need to restore the decisive role of the national states in the EU'. It also opposed decisions taken by European institutions and 'non-elected bureaucrats' who are 'disconnected from the reality of everyday life' (ANO, 2024). The party criticized



the EU Pact on Migration, framing it as a security concern and warning the Czech Republic not to ‘take the path of Western Europe, where no-go zones have sprung up in many cities, where people are afraid to go out at night, and women are at risk of violence’ (ANO, 2024). ANO also promised to reform the European Green Deal passed ‘in defiance of common sense’, claiming that ‘Brussels has decided to commit ritual suicide’ (ANO, 2024). ANO rejected the idea of the ban on combustion engines and even dedicated a chapter in its manifesto to the issue, contributing to the high salience of the issue in the electoral campaign. ANO also criticized the EU for the supposed ‘restrictions on freedom of expression that are now taking place under the guise of fighting disinformation. In reality, however, this term often masquerades as the EU’s desire to regulate and restrict the publication of alternative opinions’ (ANO, 2024). Even more, ANO blamed ‘both domestic and Brussels elites’ for ‘wanting to control, dominate and re-educate people in various ways’ (ANO, 2024), comparing it to the oppression of human rights and freedom during the communist regime before 1989.

SPD is a populist radical-right party led by Tomio Okamura. The party, along with its predecessor, Dawn of Direct Democracy (also founded by Okamura), has been represented in the national parliament since the 2013 general elections, consistently garnering around 10% of the vote. The party’s initial success was tied to Okamura’s popularity as a TV personality (he was president of the Czech Association of Travel Agencies, performed in a reality show, and gained media attention with his project of a toy travel agency). The party has capitalized on its potent anti-establishment appeal and, with the onset of the immigration crisis, adopted xenophobic, uncompromisingly anti-immigration and hard Eurosceptic rhetoric. SPD has become one of the most vocal anti-Ukrainian voices following Russia’s 2022 invasion (Havlík & Kluknavská, 2023). Due to its anti-Islam stance, SPD has been a stalwart defender of Israel during the Israel– Hamas conflict. Unlike ANO, SPD has never been part of the government.

In mid 2023 SPD formed an electoral alliance with Tricolour, another populist radical-right outfit, ahead of the 2024 EP elections. The two parties continued to co-operate in the run-up to the polls. A first glance at SPD’s EP manifesto reveals a striking similarity with ANO’s rhetoric. The major difference lies in SPD’s more radical language, a generally more sceptical attitude towards the EU (including a demand for a membership referendum), and a stronger emphasis on immigration policy. SPD was highly critical of the EU, describing it as a ‘dictatorship in Brussels’ dominated by ‘non-elected bureaucrats’ who produce ‘directives that are against the



interests of our state and our people' (SPD, 2024).

The party framed the issue of migration primarily in security terms, rejecting the EU Pact for Migration, claimed that the EU supports 'mass migration and multiculturalism', and stated that '[m]any Western European cities have already been Islamised, resulting in huge crime, terrorism, and the domination of Sharia law in so-called no-go zones' (SPD, 2024). SPD also rejected the Green Deal, vehemently opposing 'any attempt to reduce car transport and combustion engines' (SPD, 2024). The party criticized political correctness, accusing the EU of censorship and a disingenuous campaign against disinformation. Overall, among the Czech political parties represented in the EP, SPD was closest to 'hard Euroscepticism', challenging the current trajectory of the EU and even questioning the Czech Republic's membership.

In addition to the existing populist political parties with representation in the Czech parliament, several new populist radical-right parties have emerged since the 2021 election. These parties have capitalized on discursive opportunities related to the high level of inflation (at times the highest among EU member states), the government's austerity policies, and, to some extent, the war in Ukraine. In 2022, Jindřich Rajchl, a former member of Tricolour and an organizer of anti-COVID-19 measures demonstrations, founded the Law, Respect, Expertise (Právo, Respekt, Odbornost, PRO) party. Rajchl co-organized several anti-government demonstrations, the largest of which drew around 70,000 participants. However, he and his party lost momentum as the Czech economy gradually recovered and public support for pro-Russian stances remained limited.

Conversely, the political party Oath, founded in 2021 by former police chief Róbert Šlachta, whose anti-organized crime unit led a corruption investigation that toppled the right-wing cabinet in 2013, stabilized its support. Despite receiving 4% of the votes in the 2021 general election and polling below the 5% electoral threshold, the party saw an uptick in support before the election, according to some opinion polls. One reason for the increasing support was the electoral coalition Oath formed with Motorists for Themselves (formerly named Referendum on the EU, later the Party for the Independence of the Czech Republic).

The coalition leveraged the opportunity to campaign against the government, took an anti-immigration position and strongly criticized the European Green Deal, especially the planned ban on cars with combustion engines. Although many



political parties made similar claims, the coalition gained credibility in the fight to preserve combustion engines by placing Filip Turek, a former racing driver, luxury car collector and social media influencer, at the top of its electoral list. Despite consistently polling around 5%, the coalition saw a growth in support shortly before the election. Some analysts attributed this boost to Turek’s increased media visibility, which included allegations of his use of Nazi symbols (which Turek downplayed) and the fact that the party and Turek himself became a target of negative campaigning from some of the government and opposition parties. For instance, the electoral leader of Mayors and Independents, one of the government parties, challenged Turek to a TV debate, framing him as a major threat to Czech democracy. This debate, which took place just a few days before the election, recorded significant viewership and may have impacted the result of the party in the election.

## Electoral results

Populist parties gained 10 of the 21 MEP seats allocated to the Czech Republic. ANO took poll position with 26.1% of the vote (electing seven MEPs), increasing its support by 5 percentage points compared to the 2019 EP elections. The SPD and Tricolour list secured 5.7% of the votes and one seat, a decline of more than 3 percentage points compared to 2019. The biggest surprise of the election was the 10.3% of the votes and two seats won by AUTO. By including the votes received by other protest parties, such as the coalition Stačilo (Enough) led by the KSČM, with those received by populist parties, the protest camp secured a majority of 55% of the votes.

Table 1: The results of the 2024 EP election in the Czech Republic

	Vote share (%)	Seats	Populist	Government
<b>ANO</b>	26.1	7	yes	no
<b>Spolu</b>	22.3	6	no	yes
<b>AUTO</b>	10.3	2	yes	no
<b>Stacilo</b>	9.6	2	no	no
<b>Mayors and Independents (STAN)</b>	8.7	2	no	yes
<b>Pirate party</b>	6.2	1	no	yes
<b>SPD</b>	5.7	1	yes	no

Source: Czech Statistical Office, 2024 (<https://www.volby.cz/>)

Despite the government’s low popularity, the incumbent parties scored relatively well, collectively gaining almost 37% of the votes (compared to 43% in the 2021 general election). The right-wing Spolu coalition (22.3% and 6 MEPs) achieved a fair result, and Mayors and Independents (STAN) met the expectations set by the

public opinion polls (8.7% of votes and 2 MEPs). Among the governing parties, only the Pirates performed poorly (6.2% and 1 MEP). The election did not signal a revival for the SPD, once a defining pole in the party system. Having remained just below the electoral threshold in the 2021 general election and losing parliamentary representation after more than 30 years, the SPD received less than 2% of the votes, continuing their decline into irrelevance.

As with the previous EP elections in Czechia, the results were marked by low electoral turnout. However, turnout increased significantly to 36%, the highest in the history of EP elections in the Czech Republic (up from 29% in 2019). According to an analysis of aggregated data published shortly after the election, the increase in turnout was likely linked to mobilization in peripheral areas, including the so-called inner peripheries (Grim, 2024). These are less developed areas with lower levels of infrastructure, higher unemployment and a higher proportion of low-educated people. It should be noted that peripheral status is not defined exclusively by economic factors; it also has vital historical, social, and cultural dimensions (Bernard & Šimon, 2017). Previous studies have shown that people living in peripheral areas are more likely to hold populist attitudes (Dvořák et al., 2024), and populist parties tend to be more successful in areas characterized by economic hardship or an ageing population (Dvořák & Zouhar, 2022; Lysek et al., 2021). Early analyses of the aggregated data indicate that the 2024 EP election followed this pattern. ANO, AUTO, SPD and Stačilo were most successful in the peripheral areas. The notable results of ANO, which benefited the most from increased turnout in these areas, confirm the transformation in the character of support for the once-centrist populist party (Havlík & Voda, 2018). The success of populists in the areas may stem from the harsh impact of the recent inflation and austerity policies introduced by the government on the people living in peripheral areas. However, historically, the peripheral regions have always been more critical of the EU, and their Euroscepticism may also have played a notable role (Plešivčák, 2020).

Data from opinion surveys conducted a few weeks before the election reveal important similarities and some differences in the socio-demographics of the electorates of the three populist parties that crossed the electoral threshold. Support for ANO spanned various socio-demographic groups but primarily relied on voters without high school diplomas (37% declared they would vote for ANO) and those aged 60 or older (34%). Conversely, only 9% of voters with a university degree and 11% of those aged 18–29 supported ANO. SPD supporters were mostly men and individuals with elementary education, with younger voters less likely to support



SPD compared to those aged 45–59. Due to the small number of respondents supporting AUTO, identifying a clearer voter profile is challenging, although there was slightly higher support among men and younger voters (STEM, 2024).

Despite the lack of data on the ideological profiles of populist party voters, it is evident that, on average, populist parties were more attractive to less educated voters and were more successful in peripheral areas. The spatially uneven growth of electoral turnout suggests that the overall rise of populist parties can be attributed to higher mobilization in areas favourable to them. Nevertheless, the differing changes in support for various populist parties (notably the growth of AUTO and Stačilo versus the decline of SPD) indicate limited spillover across government and opposition camps. The ‘populist race’ is further evidenced by data from another pre-election opinion poll, where voters were asked to cast votes (preferences) for two parties. Only a limited number used ‘split votes’ in the sense of supporting one populist (opposition) party and one governing party. This finding relates to the high level of political polarization between populist and anti-populist forces recently observed (Hrbková et al., 2024). In other words, the results of the EP election in Czechia point to the ongoing transformation of the party system from a relatively stable unidimensional competition between the left and the right into a contestation between populist and anti-populist forces (Havlík & Kluknavská, 2022).

## Discussion

The EP election in Czechia has resulted in a majority of votes for populist (and protest) parties. Despite their ideological differences, all of these parties share a critical attitude towards the supranational principles underpinning the EU’s functioning and call for strengthening the role of national states in the EU decision-making process. SPD even advocates a reconsideration of Czech membership in the EU. Consequently, Czech populist parties will likely oppose any attempts to strengthen the powers of supranational EU institutions. Similarly, their criticism of the Green Deal and the regulation of cars with combustion engines suggests they will seek to revise the legislation or at least slow down its implementation.

However, the success and real impact of the Czech populists at the EP level will be affected by their membership in EP groups. Given ANO’s ideological shift and the departure of its former liberal pro-European MEPs, ANO decided to leave the liberal Renew group and initiated the formation of a new populist radical-right Eurosceptic group, Patriots for Europe (Pfe) alongside Fidesz and the Austrian

Freedom Party (FPÖ). Despite AUTO expressing their willingness to join the European Conservatives and Reform group (ECR), the governing Civic Democratic Party (ODS), one of the ECR's founders, did not support its inclusion, and AUTO eventually joined PfiE. Although ANO and AUTO have become members of the third-largest EP group, which includes parties such as France's far-right National Rally (RN), the Flemish Interest (Vlaams Belang, VB), Spain's Vox or Italy's Lega, the first votes in the EP have already indicated that the PfiE'S influence on policy in the current legislature will be constrained. For example, PfiE representatives have been excluded from the allocation of posts in EP committees). SPD, the most radical populist party, formed a new far-right Europe of Sovereign Nations group (ESN) alongside the Alternative for Germany or the French Reconquest. ESN is the smallest of the EP groups in the 2024–2029 legislature, and – similarly to PfiE – the EP majority has applied a cordon sanitaire to the group, significantly reducing the effective power of ESN in the EP.

The results of the 2024 election in Czechia indicate a strengthening of the populist radical-right and Eurosceptic voices in the EU. First, AUTO gained representation in the EP as a new populist radical-right party. Second, the share of MEPs held by populist parties increased compared to the previous EP elections. Third, given the radicalization of ANO's ideology and its elected MEPs, the populist voices from Czechia will be more Eurosceptic and generally more radical than ever before. Although their membership in EP groups outside the mainstream of EU politics may tone down the volume of these voices significantly, the 2024 EP election delivered a clear message of a strengthened position of populist political parties in Czechia.

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**DENMARK**





# Denmark's Populism at the Crossroads: Insights into the 2024 European Parliament Election Results

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## Abstract

The populist moment that defined Danish politics from 2001 to 2019 has recently transitioned into what can be described as mainstream populism. Two concurrent developments drive this shift: first, the Social Democrats' strategy to reclaim (white) working-class support by adopting populist right-wing stances on immigration and integration, and second, the existential crisis confronting the Liberals (Venstre, V) and the Conservative party (Det Konservative Folkeparti, KF), whose electoral support reached historic lows. The 2024 European Parliament elections differed significantly from those of 2019, marked by the emergence of new political entities and pressing global issues such as the Russia–Ukraine and Israel– Hamas conflicts, along with the existential threat of climate change and the lingering effects of the post-pandemic time. Traditional populists are exploiting these issues to regain support, advocating for greater national sovereignty and cohesion in the face of perceived global threats. This paper examines the evolving dynamics of Danish politics, focusing on how the intersection of domestic and international changes is reshaping EU-related positions and the role of populism.

**Keywords:** *populism, European Parliament elections, Danish People's Party, Denmark Democrats, Socialist People's Party*

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## Background

Electoral campaigning for the European Parliament in Denmark is usually characterized by a slow start, with an agenda focusing more on national issues than European ones. Moreover, voter turnout for European elections is notably lower than for parliamentary elections. Historically, Danish turnout has ranged between 50–60%, which is relatively low for a country renowned for its high political participation and robust civic engagement.

The lower interest in European elections is influenced by different factors, including the limited understanding of the European Parliament's composition and EU decision-making processes, various degrees of EU scepticism, the relatively short campaign period and the perception that these elections are less impactful on people's daily lives, leading to reduced participation. At the 6 June 2024 European Parliament election, 58% of the electorate voted, an 8 percentage-point decrease from the 66% turnout registered in 2019.

The higher participation at the previous European Parliament election was influenced by different factors. Chief among these was the heightened mobilization around climate issues, which significantly boosted the voting turnout among younger voters, who are generally less likely to cast their vote, particularly in European elections. The 2019 national parliament election, held just ten days later, contributed to increasing the overall political interest and engagement, influencing the result of an election generally considered to be second order. Participation in the 2024 election was lower than in 2019; nonetheless, it registered the third-highest turnout recorded so far at a European election. The result outdid most of the predictions by polling institutes and experts, and it could be interpreted as a sign that Danish voters are recognizing the importance of European elections for European and international matters. The impact of global health challenges post-COVID-19 and the uncertainties stemming from the Russia–Ukraine conflict and Israel– Hamas tensions have kept the interest high in Denmark's role within the EU, motivating voters to participate, albeit the elections lacked high-profile candidates and are still viewed as less impactful and crucial than national ones.

## The shifting landscape of populism in Denmark

Over the past five years, Danish politics, especially on the radical right wing, have become increasingly fragmented and prone to radicalization. This trend is partly



driven by the mainstreaming of anti-immigration and nativist positions, which were once primarily supported by the populist parties on the radical right (Meret, 2010). These views have now permeated the mainstream right-wing and also the centre-left political discourse and programs (see e.g., Meret, 2021; Rathgeb & Wolkenstein, 2022). The Danish People's Party (DF) is the most renowned among the radical right-wing populist parties in Denmark and within the Nordic context. The DF has existed since 1995 and for about two decades, it has served as a textbook example of a successful and influential radical right-wing populist party in Western Europe (Meret & Siim, 2013). Its sustained electoral growth and political influence since the turn of the century seemed to provide the Western European radical and populist right-wing parties with the successful case and political 'winning formula' (Kitschelt, 1997) merging nativism with welfare chauvinist positions and a good portion of "heartland" (Taggart, 2000) and nostalgia (Elgenius & Rydgren, 2022; Meret, 2018).

In recent years the DF has lost significant electoral support (Meret, 2021; Etzerodt & Kongshøj, 2022; Meret forthcoming). The DF has since 2019 been in opposition under the governments led by the Social Democrat prime minister, Mette Frederiksen. Since its peak in 2014, when the DF came first in the European Parliament elections and its candidate Morten Messerschmidt received the highest number of personal votes ever recorded in Denmark, the party has experienced a striking decline. At the 2019 European Parliament and national elections, the DF support was slashed by half compared to 2014 and 2015. The endeavours of the party leadership to regain terrain and electoral support remained unsuccessful. This failure signalled an end to the DF's golden epoch, triggering deep-rooted interparty disagreement and conflict among the ranks and files and igniting personal conflicts about who should follow Kristian Thulesen Dahl into the party leadership. The choice of hardliner and former MEP Morten Messerschmidt in January 2022 came after intense lobbying for him by party founder Pia Kjærsgaard, who exerted concerted pressure on Thulesen Dahl to step down. At the time of the DF leadership shift, Morten Messerschmidt was still under investigation for fraud in the so-called 'MELD and FELD' case concerning the misuse of EU funds. In August 2021 he had been sentenced to prison, but the verdict was later declared a mistrial, following complaints about the judge's ability to rule in the case. In December 2022, Messerschmidt was then acquitted of all charges. Yet all this took place while the DF was in deep crisis and after his appointment, several high-profile DF members of parliament exited the party to join a new party, the Denmark Democrats (Danmarksdemokraterne, DD), led by former Liberal MP Inger Støjberg, who had been strongly encouraged to take over the DF leadership but declined.



The Danish People's Party has only one MEP, Anders Vistisen, who was re-elected for the 2024–2029 period. The party was one of the cofounders of the Identity and Democracy (ID) group in the European Parliament in 2019. Vistisen also participated in the rally organized by Matteo Salvini, leader of Italy's Lega in Milan in 2019, which launched a new radical right-wing coalition within the European Parliament. From 2015 to 2019, the DF was affiliated with the European Conservatives and Reformists, a group it had previously sought to join but was turned down (primarily due to the determination of Britain's Tories). Before that, the DF was part of the Eurosceptic European Freedom and Democracy group (2009–2014) alongside the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and Lega Nord.

Today, the DF advocates for a complete halt to asylum and migration, particularly from the Middle East and Africa, seeking also to put 'an end to all special demands by Muslims'. Besides making use of the slogan 'Danish First!', the party wants Denmark to withdraw from the Schengen Agreement (and eventually from the EU), reinstate permanent and effective border control, and put a stop to further EU enlargement, particularly in the case of countries with large Muslim population, such as Turkey, Albania and North Macedonia. The party claims the EU needs to be strongly downsized to safeguard national sovereignty. This stance would entail keeping all Danish opt-outs and eventually adding a new one concerning the welfare state if Denmark continues to be part of the EU. On gender equality issues, the party opposes what it calls 'gender ideology' and 'woke-ness', supporting the heterosexual family as the cornerstone of Danish society and reproduction (Meret & Siim, 2013). However, the party does acknowledge the rights of homosexual individuals, as long as these rights do not include further demands, such as the right for homosexual couples to be married in the Church. Also, the party does not oppose abortion rights, although it disagrees with the recent and widely supported proposal to increase the period a woman can legally get an abortion from 12 weeks of pregnancy to 18. In several respects, the DF is among the most progressive on such issues among the parties that belong to the brand new Patriots for Europe (Pfe) group and, before that, the ID group in the EP (like the DF, many from the latter have now joined the former).

The formation of the DD brought another notable right-wing populist party into Danish politics. Established in 2022 by former Liberal party and MP Inger Støjberg, who was convicted in 2021 for illegally separating underage asylum-seeker couples – the party is firmly based on the profile and populist charisma of the leader, who promises further hardline stances. DD, which now includes several

former high-profile members of the DF, compete directly with the latter for support on the radical and nativist right, particularly in rural areas where voters feel neglected and left behind.

The DD shares several political issues with the DF, contending, for instance, that all spontaneous asylum seekers coming to Europe should be transferred to a non-Schengen third country, even if this means reviewing the content of the existing international conventions. Also, the party asks for 'less EU' and more national sovereignty and is against any further enlargement and political integration within the EU. Yet the party does not ask for Denmark's exit from the EU. Both the DF and the DD want to scale down EU environmental policies, advocating that Denmark has already contributed sufficiently to carbon reduction efforts and should not pursue further aggressive climate actions that could adversely impact the national interests and economy. These positions reflect broader concerns among radical right and nativist groups in Denmark, besides issues concerning EU integration, asylum and migration policies, including the plans for further enlargement.

Another topic is the economic and military aid to Ukraine. In contrast with some of their European allies, who may hold pro-Russian views, the DF and the DD are declaredly pro-Ukraine and also pro-Israel and do not question the military support to the Ukrainian government. However, the situation gets less limpid when it comes to justifying the cohabitation with parties that are questioning the support given to Ukraine or even more overtly against it, which was the case with the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) before the party was expelled from the ID group (but currently, it could also be argued in the case of Hungary's Fidesz). When asked about how the party copes with this, Vistisen's standard reply is that 'foreign policy should be defined and conducted nationally. In every group in the European Parliament, there is someone who is too close to Putin and Russia and does not provide enough support for Ukraine' (Thomsen, 2024). Vistisen argues that this is a subject that should be dealt with nationally and is therefore not a matter of concern for the European Parliament groups.

More generally these positions suggest the preparedness of the DF today to support more radical stances, indicating the overall increase of competition on the Danish far right, which is also an effect of the populist mainstreaming of positions in relation to migration, asylum and integration within the country (see Rytter et al., 2023). Recently, for instance, plans to transfer asylum seekers to third countries, effectively outsourcing their reception and management overseas, have gained



widespread political support from both the centre-right and left-wing. This, despite the clear humanitarian, legal and political concerns that have emerged in relation to the accomplishment of such plans, as shown by the attempts made in other countries (see Meret, 2024).

## The 2024 European Parliament campaign

The European Parliament party campaign focused primarily on national and European security issues, emphasizing the need to increase investments in the armed forces and enhance cross-border cooperation on cybercrime and military security. These concerns were fuelled by national politics (the Danish government is to significantly increase the defence expenditures in the years 2024–2028) and by international events that also generated alarm among the public. Notably, the Nord Stream gas pipeline explosion in the Baltic Sea near Bornholm in September 2022 (which Danish authorities attributed to sabotage) heightened security discussions and fears. Additionally, a Nordic investigative documentary titled *Shadow War* revealed how Russia is conducting hybrid warfare in the Nordic countries using spies, troll farms and advanced underwater programs, posing serious threats to energy supplies and other critical infrastructure in the Northern European countries. The Hamas terror attacks on Israel on 7 October 2023 and the subsequent escalation of the conflict in the Middle East further contributed to the general perception of a situation of international instability and uncertainty. Unsurprisingly, the most frequent words used during the EP campaign were ‘global transformations’, ‘security’, ‘insecurity’, and ‘safety’.

Another very prominent topic on the political agenda was climate change and the EU’s decarbonization policies. This is one of voters’ priority issues, and several political parties have highlighted these issues to emphasize their positions. The Socialist People’s Party (Socialistisk Folkeparti, SF) spearheaded the call to accelerate decarbonization efforts and to implement policies that can achieve concrete results quickly, given the urgency of the climate crisis. In recent years, the SF has shifted towards more socially liberal positions on redistribution, migration and asylum policies. The party is now much less critical of the government’s stern stance on these issues, and the years the party supported the Social Democrats in government (2019–2022) influenced these choices.

The SF has significantly enhanced its green profile, aligning with the Greens/EFA group in the European Parliament. This strategy has attracted voters who

prioritize environmental issues and are less convinced by other parties' agendas. While most parties agree on the main climate objectives, the competition has in fact been limited. Danish politics lacks a strong Green Party, especially since the party Alternative has lost substantial electoral support and has also failed to get representation in the European Parliament. According to polls, nearly 70% of left-wing voters consider climate change one of the most important questions politicians must address. In contrast, among supporters of one of the governing parties, only 46% cited climate change as a priority (see Flinch 2024). The Social Democrats, burdened by the declining popularity of the broad government coalition, lost ground. The party struggles to stand out on major issues like climate change since it also collaborates closely with parties that downplay the importance (and speed) of decarbonization policies.

The political divide on climate change in this European Parliament election was primarily centred on reducing agricultural emissions by taxing CO<sub>2</sub> production. The left, including the SF and the Unity List (Enhedslisten, EL), along with the Social Liberals (Det Radikale Venstre, RV), advocated for more decisive and impactful measures. In contrast, the populist right (the DF and the DD) opposed environmental regulations, which they believed harmed the competitiveness of Danish agricultural products in the European market. They argue that Denmark is a small country that has already made significant efforts to protect the environment, whereas others, more polluting EU member states lag behind.

Compared to the previous election round, EU migration policies were less prominent on the agendas of parties and voters. This is partly because most established parties running for election agreed on a strict immigration policy. When the MEP candidate for the Moderates, Stine Bosse, suggested that Denmark could take in 7,000 refugees to comply with the migration solidarity pact, most mainstream parties on both the left and right rejected the idea. The Moderates eventually withdrew the suggestion, emphasizing that the party does not support relaxing existing rules and standards. Denmark still has an opt-out on Home and Justice, including asylum and migration policies. There are occasional discussions about holding a referendum to convert the opt-out into a case-by-case opt-in or abolish it altogether. This was considered in 2015 but was rejected by 53% of voters, closing the book on the issue. In contrast, the early summer 2022 referendum to put an end to the Danish defence opt-out saw over 66% voting in favour, highlighting greater concerns among the electorate over international security and defence issues, particularly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in the same year.





This referendum marked the largest difference between yes and no votes in any Danish EU opt-out referendum to date. Despite this, there remains EU scepticism among swaths of the Danish electorate concerning immigration and asylum, as well as debates about the minimum wage and the EU neighbourhood policy with potential future EU enlargement. These issues are still capitalized on politically by the populist right to gain electoral support.

## Populist party performance in the 2024 Danish European election

The biggest surprise at this 2024 European Parliament election was undoubtedly the result for the SF, which secured 17.4% of the vote, making it the biggest party in this election round. The Social Democrats garnered only 15.6%, a drop of almost 6% compared to 2019. The poor electoral outcome prompted the Social Democrats to acknowledge the party's significant (and indeed historical) losses. Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen recognized this as 'a clear signal' from the party electorate, adding to these words that 'from a Social Democratic perspective, it was definitely not good enough' (Tofte, 2024). The broad government coalition with the Liberals and the Moderates does not convince part of the Social Democratic traditional electorate, who sought elsewhere. Most of them cast their vote for the SF (Nørgaard & Refsing 2024), which is not in government, although still ideologically and politically near to the Social Democrats.

Additionally, the Social Democrats' lukewarm stance on climate change and the party's right-wing turn on asylum and migration policies (Meret, 2021; McManus & Falkenbach, 2022) may have contributed to the party's poorer result in this European election. The SF has moderated its profile and program, especially since exiting the centre-left government in 2014, shifting towards a centre-left stance (Augustín & Jørgensen, 2016: 78–79). The party employs populist rhetoric and positions to appeal in particular to (rural) constituencies, who feel neglected and betrayed by Copenhagen politics. It gains votes by staying outside the government, either in opposition or as a government supporter. Remembering the negative experience during its first time in government (2011–2014), the SF has managed to regain electoral support but still needs to demonstrate its reliability when in power. Revealingly, the party's leader, Pia Olsen Dyhr, toured the country with the DD's Inger Støjberg at so-called 'CO2 rallies'. They performed together, boasted about their friendship when on stage, and praised Danish democracy and consensus

politics, demonstrating that political competitors can collaborate despite differing political positions.

Established parties on both the right and left have generally experienced a decline in electoral support at these European Parliament elections. Notably, the Liberals recorded another historic drop in the voters' support, garnering only 14.7% of the votes, a loss of nearly 9 percentage points compared to 2019. The Moderates and the DD, both led by former high-profile Liberal members of parliament, appear to have gained from this, along with the Liberal Alliance, whose electoral gains continue to surprise.

Overall, the populist right received 13.8% of the votes: the DF garnered only 6.4% of the support, losing 4.4% of the votes compared to 2019. These results indicate that the decline of this party since 2019 does not necessarily reflect a decreased demand for populist and nativist politics in Denmark. On the contrary, new political organizations and groups have emerged to meet the existing demand, despite the efforts of the established parties from both the right and the left, to contain it by adopting some of the branding issues. These strategies seem in fact to have contributed to further radicalizing and polarizing the electorate, particularly on asylum, immigration and integration policies, but also on issues that have to do with the discontent of the periphery/countryside towards the centre/city.

Recently, the DF joined the new group, the PfiE, launched by Viktor Orbán, the Hungarian prime minister and Fidesz leader. Within this new radical right-wing European Parliamentary group, Vistisen has been designated as the 'chief whip' (Wax, 2024). He ran a highly critical campaign against the EU and Ursula von der Leyen's tenure, directly confronting her during a public event attended by representatives of all European Parliament groups. He accused her of lacking democratic legitimacy, stating that 'No one has ever voted for you, and that is not worthy of a European democracy. Therefore, you will be the first one we fire'. He further asserted: 'Brussels has become a swamp, and we need to put a stop to it' (Jorsal, 2024).

The 2024 election also marked the first time the DD reached the European Parliament with an agenda focusing on reducing EU influence and safeguarding national sovereignty. The party garnered 7.4% of the votes, which allowed their leading candidate, Kristoffer Hjort Storm, to join the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group. Storm had previously served as the DF representative on



the Aalborg municipal council for several years. Notably, the slogan supporting Storm's DD candidacy for the European Parliament was: 'Trust [Inger] Støjberg. Vote for Storm', complemented by a video in which party leader Inger Støjberg spoke while Kristoffer Storm listened. Yet, this year's MEP candidates were relatively unknown to the Danish electorate. To bolster their credibility and visibility, many required direct endorsements from their party leaders on billboards, in political advertisements and at events; an indication that European Parliament elections are still not considered crucial enough to the country's politics.

## Discussion

The Danish political landscape is today more fragmented, including at the European Parliament level, where party groups exhibit variations in their positions on key issues. For example, there is a wide range of stances on the support for Ukraine in its conflict with Russia, with parties like the DF and the DD advocating for strong military and financial aid while others call for diplomatic solutions to put an end to the war, or even express scepticism about European involvement. The role of the EU is another area of divergence. While some of the parties accept the EU as a regulating entity for market integration purposes, others ask for the country's withdrawal from the EU.

On LGBTQ+ and reproductive rights, the spectrum of opinions is broad among the radical and populist right. The DF and the DD view homosexual and reproductive rights as achieved and indisputable rights in contemporary societies, and they rather make use of these to attack what they deem to be Islam's backwardness among the Muslim minority (see Farris, 2017). This stance positions them in uncomfortable company, sharing the ultraconservative and traditionalist views held by parties that belong to their European Parliamentary groups, such as Spain's Vox, the Fratelli d'Italia, Portugal's Chega party and Hungary's Fidesz. Political internal and intra-group divergences were little addressed by the MEP candidates during the electoral campaign, both on the right and left of the spectrum. However, as these issues come to the forefront during the upcoming parliamentary activity within a political landscape that, after the elections, has tilted more to the right, they will need to be addressed, inevitably impacting party relationships within their respective groups and activities. Political tensions, conflicts and new alliances may arise as the populist right – but also the left – navigates internal differences and degrees of extremeness within the European Parliament.

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**ESTONIA**



# Populism in the 2024 European Parliament Elections in Estonia

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## Abstract

Although past European Parliament (EP) elections in Estonia have witnessed the success of an anti-establishment candidate, Estonian EP elections are not generally fertile soil for populism. Estonian EP elections tend to be dominated by the liberal and progressive parties and candidates with notable foreign policy track records. The 2024 EP elections generally confirmed this pattern but also witnessed the conservative parties running on a second-order election agenda critical of the government and parties both on the right and left-wing edges of the spectrum tapping into the small but nonetheless committed pool of Eurosceptic voters. Moreover, most parties made use of the stylistic repertoires of populism, attempting to perform various crises. While the election results changed little in the overall composition of the Estonian MEP delegation, the events unravelling immediately after the election suggest that the Estonian populist radical right will become more diverse but also more isolated from its sibling parties on the European level.

**Keywords:** *Estonia, populism, Euroscepticism, sovereigntism, second-order elections, European Parliament*

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## Background

In Estonian politics, populism tends to manifest as a discursive or performative strategy or a policy logic rather than an ideological fixture (Jakobson et al., 2012). Only a handful of parties have been dubbed as populist. For example, the Estonian Conservative People's Party (EKRE) has typically been characterized as a populist radical-right party (Petsinis, 2019; Kasekamp et al., 2019; Saarts et al., 2021). It entered the European Parliament (EP) and joined the Identity and Democracy (ID) group in 2019. Historically, the Centre Party under the charismatic leadership of Edgar Savisaar (1991–1995, 1996–2016) was characterized as left-wing populist (Jakobson et al., 2012). However, since 2016, the party has undergone two leadership changes and substantive shifts in both its political style and program. In addition, populism has been a strategy of new protest parties, but most of them have been relatively short-lived (Auers, 2018).

The limits of populist appeals have applied in EP elections, in particular, as they are characterized by a generally low electoral turnout and lower level of populist performance since, typically, the more highly educated voters with a political preference turn out to vote. The notable exception occurred in 2009, when a protest candidate, Indrek Tarand, scored over a quarter of the popular vote on an anti-partitocracy platform, criticizing the cartelization of (established) parties and neglecting the actual will of the people (Ehin & Solvak, 2012). Hence, the present report will also analyse the use of populist strategies across parties regardless of whether they are mainstream or fringe or where they are placed on the socioeconomic (left–right) or sociocultural (GAL–TAN) spectrum.

The 2024 EP elections took place 15 months after the general election in Estonia, and a liberal coalition consisting of the Reform Party, Estonia 200 and the Social Democratic Party were in power. Unlike in the previous electoral cycle, where stable coalition formation was difficult due to the distribution of parliamentary seats, the liberal parties had a comfortable majority during the 2024 EP elections. Nevertheless, there were notable tensions in the air regarding the national budget. Due to the war in Ukraine, where Estonia has been one of the most generous supporters of Ukraine in terms of GDP, Estonia has raised its defence spending to 3% of GDP and now struggles with a looming budget deficit. These budget tensions prompted the new government coalition to plan cuts and propose new taxes (e.g., a previously non-existent car tax) and raise existing ones (e.g., VAT and income tax from 20% to 22%), which has been politically difficult, especially as the Reform Party and Estonia 200



are economically right-leaning parties. Upon formation, the governing coalition christened itself as the Pain Coalition, forced to take painful decisions.

Due to this, also the EP 2024 election followed the logic of second-order elections to a great extent, where many parties tried to pitch the election as a referendum on the government's policy, although for a large share of voters, this was outshined by issues related to the Russia–Ukraine War. Second-order elections essentially entail a significant share of anti-establishment politics, with the opposition in the national government criticizing the ruling elites and attempting to position themselves as the true representative of the virtuous people (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017). Populism's emphasis on popular sovereignty also entails Eurosceptic attitudes, although, in Estonia, most parties resort to, at worst, soft Euroscepticism (Taggart & Szerbiak 2001), and this remained true in the 2024 EP election.

In total, Estonia elected 7 MEPs in the 2024 election, and a total of 78 candidates on 9 party lists and as individual candidates ran for the mandates. In addition to the five parties represented in the parliament (five of which were also represented in the 2019–2024 EP), three smaller parties and five individual candidates ran. However, none of the challengers managed to win a mandate.

## The supply side of populism

Due to the small number of MEPs Estonia elects (just seven), EP elections in Estonia tend to be candidate-centric, where candidates compete not only concerning the ideological platforms of their parties but as individual candidates, with their personal traits and career tracks playing an important part. This tendency means EP elections are more elitist than populist, with former government ministers and foreign policy experts performing well.

In general, Estonian parties also tend to be notably pro-European integration. In 2019, only two parties, the populist radical-right EKRE (ID group) and the right-wing conservative Isamaa (EPP group), ran soft Eurosceptic campaigns (Ehin et al., 2020). In 2024, Isamaa's campaign was somewhat less Eurosceptic (the party had meanwhile also changed its leadership), but in addition to EKRE, two new parties complemented the Eurosceptic scene, challenging EU integration and accusing it of overregulation or even harming Estonia's national interests. Furthermore, many parties touched upon migration and asylum policy, human rights, foreign affairs and, notably, environmental policies (a significant and divisive topic in these elections). However,





the main emphasis continued to be the Russia–Ukraine War and defence policy.

EKRE (still a member of the ID group during the campaign) continued to be the leading Eurosceptic party in Estonia in the 2024 EP elections, with a core pledge to maintain the EU as a union of nation-states. It called for better representation of national interests on the EU level (especially for smaller and newer member states like Estonia), ‘preserving Estonian national culture and identity from the attacks of woke-culture’ and stated that in case the EU treaties are opened for discussion, a new referendum over EU membership ought to be held (EKRE, 2024). It also challenged the EU for allegedly moving towards ideological control and suppression of individual rights, the overregulation of all domains (especially vis-à-vis the common market) and objected to introducing EU-level taxation. In addition, EKRE’s platform challenged the EU’s Green Deal as environmental extremism that favours only certain businesses and would ‘hurl majority of the people into poverty’ (Ibid). Another core policy topic in their program was immigration. The party warned that ‘immigration propaganda’ would force the public to accept ‘the rapid rise in numbers of Muslim and Eastern Slavic immigrants’ and asserted that devising immigration policy ought to be the sovereign right of nation-states.<sup>1</sup> EKRE proposed returning immigrants to their countries of origin, also urging the return of Ukrainian refugees after the end of the war in order to avert a demographic crisis there.

Overall, EKRE’s campaign focused on the party’s core national–conservative ideology rather than its populist elements. The party emphasized the need to persuade the more conservative voters to participate in the EP elections, which have been, to date, dominated by more liberally minded voters (which is accurate, as liberal parties tend to perform better in the EP elections compared to national ones).

Founded in 2022 by a group of politicians expelled from the Isamaa party, the economically liberal, right-wing Parempoolised (‘the Right-wingers’), which positioned itself as a potential member of the EPP group, is not a populist party as such (i.e., does not claim to represent the ‘real’ people) but frequently takes a decidedly anti-establishment position in claiming that the ruling elites are incompetent or not interested in dealing with pressing problems, especially from the entrepreneurs’ perspective. Hence, it somewhat resembles certain technocratic populist parties in Eastern Europe (Guasti & Buščíková, 2020). Their soft

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1. According to the Lisbon Treaty, immigration remains a competence solely of the member states. The treaty only foresees a common asylum policy.

Euroscepticism also manifested in a similar genre, namely in their criticism toward overregulation, deepening integration (which can harm the interests of nation-states) and the decline in global competitiveness of the common market. In their platform titled “We protect liberty”, the Right-wingers claimed to be the ‘antidote to socialism’ proliferating in Europe (Parempoold, 2024). Similarly to EKRE, the party also took a critical stance toward the current EU-level environmental and immigration policy. However, it proposed different solutions, for example, emphasizing the need to attract international talent (but also keeping refugees in screening camps outside of EU borders) or supporting market-based solutions to the climate crisis. Nevertheless, as technocratic populists do more generally, The Right-wingers also emphasized its candidates’ apolitical, expert background, featuring renowned Estonian defence policy experts and entrepreneurs (among others).

Another newly established party, KOOS<sup>2</sup> (Together), ran on a left-wing conservative platform, which also includes a notable pro-Russian note, especially given that the party’s chairman and only candidate in the 2024 EP elections, Aivo Peterson, was currently on trial for treason due to supporting Russia’s aggression in Ukraine. In the 2024 EP election, the party’s platform called for neutral foreign policy, strengthening international cooperation (but not mentioning with whom), dropping sanctions which they see as harmful to both the sanctioned and the sanctioning countries’ economies, but also protecting traditional family values and fostering multiculturalism. While the party did not campaign from an explicitly Eurosceptic position, the complete avoidance of even mentioning the EU in their manifesto and proposing a sovereigntist, alternative foreign policy program to Euro-Atlantic integration evidently indicates opposition to EU integration. The party’s rhetoric is notably inclusionary, as the party positions itself as the protector of the interests of ‘all Estonia’s inhabitants’, but also sets itself in a notably anti-establishment position, emphasizing that Aivo Peterson, who was in custody during the election campaign ‘demonstrates his will in practice, which does not bend under the pressure of the state’.

The right-wing conservative Isamaa (EPP group) did not run on a Eurosceptic platform per se, although it also criticized the overregulation on the EU level in passing and cited uncontrolled migration and radical Islamism as threats to the foundations of European values alongside authoritarianism and terrorism (Isamaa 2024). However, as the leading opposition party in the national parliament (according

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2. The full name of the party is KOOS Organisatsioon Osutab Suveräänsusele (TOGETHER Organization Points to Sovereignty).



to party ratings at the time of the EP election), it took an anti-establishment stance and attempted to frame the election as a vote of confidence against the national-level ruling coalition government. It borrowed one of its election slogans, 'Enough of false politics and deceiving people' from an anti-establishment popular movement of 2012 (although at the time, Isamaa, then called IRL, was in government and subject to public protests). Hence, it cannot be described as a populist party par excellence, but it still utilized some of its stylistic features.

The other moderate left-wing and right-wing liberal parties (namely, the Reform Party, the Social Democrats, the Centre Party and Estonia 200) did not refer to similar Eurosceptic arguments nor emphasized policy positions that could be considered populist. Even the left-wing Centre Party, considered populist in the past (Jakobson et al., 2012),<sup>3</sup> ran on a notably pro-EU integration platform and did not attempt to gain attention with populist topics. However, virtually all parties utilized populism as a performative style in their campaign tactics. According to Moffitt (2016: 8), one core aspect of populism is 'emphasising crisis, breakdown or threat'. As a result, populists 'perform crisis' by 'spectacularising failure' and amplifying the looming threats to the level of crisis (Ibid.: 121–122). In addition to Isamaa and the Right-wingers, who campaigned under slogans like 'Do not let yourself be deceived by those who gave baseless promises the last time' or 'A vote to the Social Democrats and [Marina] Kaljurand is support for the government of [Kaja] Kallas. Don't let yourself be deceived again. Vote for Isamaa!', the moderate and liberal parties also utilized crisis performance. For instance, candidates of the Reform Party and Social Democrats warned the voters of the 'radicals' who would 'destroy Europe's unity' (Social Democrats) or emphasized the fragility or complexity of the security situation in which the EP elections took place (Reform Party).

## The demand side of populism

With the notable exception of Indrek Tarand, who scored a mandate as an individual candidate in both 2009 and 2014, populist candidates tend not to fare very well in Estonian EP elections<sup>4</sup>. While Euroscepticism is not prevalent in Estonia – 77–78% of the population supports EU membership (Eurobarometer,

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3. This study analysed Centre Party's positions of the party under the charismatic leadership of Edgar Savisaar. Since 2016 when he left the leadership, the party has undergone two major leadership changes, the latter of which brought former mayor of Tallinn and the presumable leader of the party's Russian wing Mihhail Kõlvart to the chairmanship of the party and caused the internal opposition to leave the party (including the previous chairman Jüri Ratas).

2024; State Chancellery, 2024) – it thrives in certain societal segments, being associated with lower trust in government and lower levels of economic welfare. Euroscepticism is particularly concentrated in the country's northeast, where the population is predominantly Russian-speaking (State Chancellery, 2024).

The EP 2024 results reflected the same trend, with five out of seven Estonian MEPs maintaining their mandate after the election.<sup>5</sup> EKRE, which became the first Eurosceptic party in Estonia<sup>6</sup> to win a mandate in EP elections in 2019, also maintained its seat, although after the elections, when an internal schism developed in the party prior to party chairman elections, their MEP Jaak Madison left the party and joined the ECR group.

Foreign, defence and security policy took central stage both in the campaigns and in public opinion, with 55% of Estonians seeing the war in Ukraine as the most important issue facing the EU at the moment, while only 15% viewed immigration as such (Eurobarometer, 2024). While economic insecurities are viewed as of the highest importance on the national level, these were not seen as relevant in EU-level politics (ibid).

While the media coverage of the campaign was relatively low-key in general (campaigning mainly took place on social media and other paid advertisements), it also did not amplify the populist messaging of the parties. Instead, the media resorted more to the moderator role, organizing numerous debates and potentially only sensationalizing the personal branding campaign of former prime minister Jüri Ratas (who ran under the Isamaa banner) on various social media channels.

The biggest winner in these elections was Isamaa, who gained a seat for Jüri Ratas (who scored in total the third-best individual result). At the same time, the Reform Party lost a seat of its incumbent MEP Andrus Ansip (also a former prime minister), who did not run in the election due to differences in opinion with the incumbent prime minister, Kaja Kallas. Overall, while the parties identified here as featuring

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4. In the 2009 EP elections a single candidate Indrek Tarand running on a protest platform secured more than quarter of the popular vote. He also secured a seat in 2014 EP elections, but since then, has only scored around 2000 votes in the lists of various parties.
  5. Mihhail Kõlvart, elected from the Centre Party list, surrendered his mandate to Jana Toom, who had served as the Centre Party MEP since 2014, so in practice, only one of the seven Estonian MEPs changed.
  6. In the first EP elections (2004), the Centre Party also ran on an Eurosceptic platform and secured a mandate, but then the party joined the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) group and adopted pro-EU integration rhetoric.



some elements of Euroscepticism gained somewhat in their share of the popular vote, the pro-integration parties still hold the majority of seats (See Table 1).

Table 1. EP 2024 election results in Estonia and change in party support and seats.

Party	EP group <sup>7</sup>	% of votes 2019	% of votes 2024	Seats won	Change in seats won 2019-2024
Isamaa	EPP	10.3%	21.5%	2	+1
Social Democrats	ESD	23.3%	19.3%	2	0
Reform Party	Renew	26.2%	17.9%	1	-1
EKRE	ID/ECR	12.7%	14.8%	1	0
Centre Party	Renew	14.4%	12.4%	1	0
Right-wingers	EPP	-	6.8%	0	0
KOOS	N/A	-	3.1%	0	0
Estonia 200	N/A	3.2%	2.6%	0	0
Greens	EG	1.8%	0.6%	0	0
Individual candidates	N/A	7.1%	0.7%	0	0

Source: State Electoral Office, author.

As there are no exit polls conducted in Estonia, it is not possible to interpret the results in terms of socio-demographic or attitudinal profiles of the voters. However, what is evident from available data is that Isamaa performed best in almost all counties except for the largest cities, Tallinn and Tartu and the predominantly Russian-speaking Ida-Viru County in the northeast. Isamaa's success has been popularly interpreted both as a result of its antigovernment campaign as well as the success of Jüri Ratas' personal campaign. However, pre-election survey data suggests that mistrust in the Estonian government was a poor predictor of support for Isamaa and instead predicted support for KOOS and EKRE (Keerma, 2024). Furthermore, Isamaa was perceived as having ownership in defence and foreign policy by lower educated voters, while more highly educated voters perceived the Reform Party as the issue owner (ibid).

EKRE also scored more votes than in 2019 in almost all counties but lost support among external voters and in the rural county of Jõgeva. Their support was largely predicted by anti-immigrant attitudes and mistrust in government (Keerma 2024). Meanwhile, the Right-wingers party scored its best results in larger towns and most likely not among populist voters, but rather more entrepreneurially

7. In 2019–2024, EKRE was part of the ID group, represented there by MEP Jaak Madison. In the 2024 election he maintained his seat, but due to major internal tensions that became public after the election, Madison left EKRE. When the ID group, where Madison intended to continue, dissolved, he joined the ECR group, which he justified with the lack of democracy and transparency in the formation of the new Patriots for Europe (PFE) group where the founders had not consulted with members from smaller member states. He also expressed sympathy with the clearer anti-Russian stance of most members in the ECR group.



minded voters who would favour a more minimal state.

Finally, KOOS performed best in regions with the highest share of Russian-speaking voters, particularly in the Ida-Viru County, where more voters are disposed to its sovereigntist foreign policy and pro-Russia messaging. In Ida-Viru County, KOOS scored 19.6% of the vote and in the capital city, Tallinn, 3.9%. Both regions feature a sizeable Russian-speaking population. The Centre Party experienced losses in all other regions except for Tallinn and Ida-Viru County, where it presumably improved its result with the Russian-speaking voters.

Also, electoral participation rose slightly. While in 2019, 332,859 voters cast a ballot, in 2024, 367,975 (37.6%<sup>8</sup> of the electorate) turned out. Electoral turnout in EP elections tends to be higher in the liberal-leaning larger cities of Tallinn (the capital) and Tartu (a university town) and even lower in the predominantly Russian-speaking Ida-Viru County and the rural regions. In 2024, electoral turnout rose in all electoral districts, most notably in liberal-leaning Tartu and Tallinn.

## Discussion and perspectives

As a rule, populism does not play a notable role in Estonian EP elections. Almost all parties use certain features of populist performance. However, the ideological core issues of populism, such as Euroscepticism, sovereigntism or overruling minority rights (on the populist right), do not find overwhelming support. This rule also applied in 2024, when voters still tended to prefer candidates who could be described as belonging to the political or intellectual elites and running on moderate and non-populist platforms. As a result, six out of the seven Estonian MEPs will return to Brussels and Strasbourg. Six out of seven MEPs elected in 2024 belong to the three moderate EP groups (EPP, SD and Renew) and one MEP, Jaak Madison – formerly a member of the ID group and the EKRE party in Estonia – will be joining the ECR group as an independent candidate when the parliament reconvenes. Hence, it is relatively unlikely that Estonian MEPs will engage in markedly populist politics in the EP. While the election campaign of Isamaa (EPP) involved some hints of soft Euroscepticism and anti-immigrant positions, neither of their elected MEPs has a notable track record of supporting such a policy line.

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8. In 2023, the system for calculating turnout changed in Estonia. Previously, only the external voters who cast their vote were added to the total number of eligible voters. Now, the online electoral list includes everyone eligible to vote regardless of their residency. Hence, although in 2019, the recorded turnout rate was also 37.6%, the voter turnout was more than 10 percentage points higher in 2024.



Jaak Madison, who, as an ECR group member, was likely to continue his earlier anti-immigration and sovereigntist policy line, surprisingly joined the Estonian Centre Party on 22 August 2024, which may signal either a moderation of his stances or a crystallization of the soft Eurosceptic position of the Centre Party, whose members became represented both in the Renew and ECR groups.<sup>9</sup>

With Madison leaving EKRE, the link between EKRE and the populist radical-right parties in the EP is likely weakened. However, with a new conservative nationalist party – the Estonian Nationalists and Conservatives<sup>10</sup> – being established, it is possible that in future EP elections, Estonia will witness both candidates of the ECR as well as the PöE competing for a seat.

Furthermore, the 2024 election demonstrated that there are at least two Eurosceptic pockets in the Estonian electorate – one on the radical right appealing primarily to national– conservative voters (with anti-immigrant attitudes), and another among Russian-speaking voters who favour sovereigntist, antigovernment and pro-Russia messaging, which collides with the dominant policy line of both the Estonian government and the EU. The election results in Ida-Viru County demonstrate particularly well the importance of moderate alternatives (in this case, the Centre Party) but also draw attention to the potentially harmful cocktail of low economic welfare, societal marginalization and receptiveness to Russia's strategic narratives that sits well with populist sovereigntism.

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9. On 14 September 2024 the Center Party decided to leave the Renew group, which it sees as 'too federalist', but did not announce which group it would join.

10. Eesti Rahvuslased ja Konservatiivid (ERK) is a new party established on 29 June 2024 by former members of EKRE, many of whom were kicked out of the party for disloyalty to the Helme family which dominates the top echelons of the party. ERK claims to uphold the same national–conservative values as EKRE, but opposes EKRE's brash political style and increasingly authoritarian, family-centric leadership.

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FINLAND



# The Loss of the Populist Radical Right in the 2024 European Parliament Elections in Finland

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## Abstract

In the 2024 European Parliament (EP) elections, the populist radical-right Finns Party had a disappointing result; it came sixth nationally and lost 6.2% of the vote and one seat compared to the 2019 elections. The centre-right National Coalition (NC) party won the elections with 24.8% of the vote and four seats, but the real winner was the Left Alliance, which came second (17.3%) and gained three seats. The elections revealed voters' deep distrust towards the government, in which the Finns Party supported significant austerity measures and cuts to public spending through its leader and finance minister, Riikka Purra. People's fear of the rising far right in Europe was also a salient theme in campaign debates, which diminished the Finns Party's support, alongside a low voter turnout.

**Keywords:** *Election campaign; populist radical right; Finns Party; antagonism; government/opposition*

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## Introduction

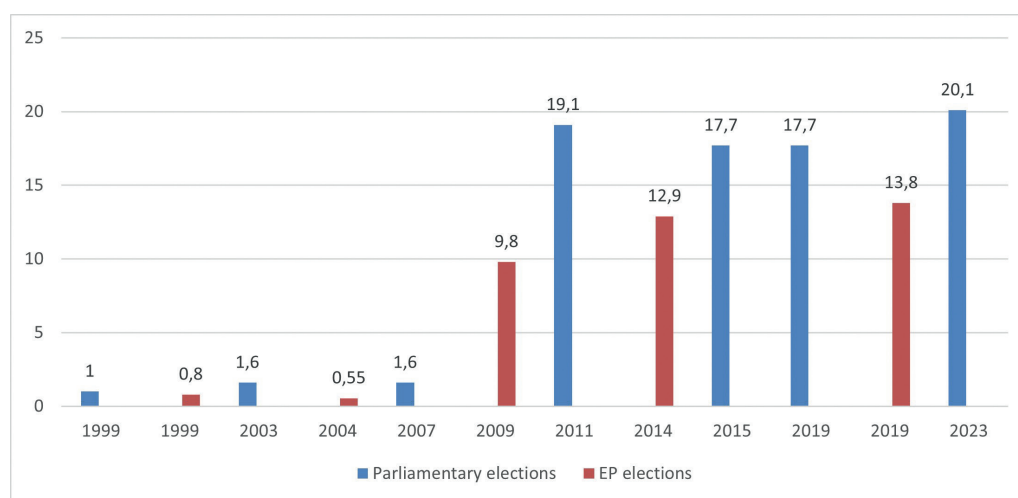
In Finland, one political party is commonly referred to as ‘populist’ – the Finns Party (Perussuomalaiset, which was initially called True Finns). However, depending on how populism is defined, other political parties and individual politicians may sometimes be described as being populist when they use provocative language, make unrealistic promises and encourage strong antagonisms (see Herkman, 2022). Therefore, the label ‘populist’ has occasionally been used to refer to liberal green or leftist actors and minor political parties with little or no representation in parliament. Here populism is understood as an affective process in which strong antagonisms are exploited to construct a united political group identity and movement mobilization as ‘the people’ (Laclau, 2005; Herkman, 2022). In this, no other parliamentary party than the Finns Party can be called ‘populist’ as such in Finland.

The Finns Party was established in 1995 as the successor of the Finnish Rural Party, an agrarian populist party created in 1959. The legacy of the Finnish Rural Party (SMP) has made the Finns Party a more normal political player compared to the populist parties of the Nordic countries (Herkman & Jungar, 2021). Under the leadership of Timo Soini (1997–2017), the Finns Party was a rather traditional populist party with an anti-elitist, nationalist and Eurosceptic agenda, as well as left-leaning economic policies. However, in the 2010s, Soini started flirting with actors opposed to immigration, and the party became very popular. Under the leadership of Jussi Halla-aho (2017–2021) and Riikka Purra (2021–present), the party has become a clear example of the European populist radical right, with a strong anti-immigration message and nativist ideology (Jungar & Jupskås, 2014; Norocel, 2016). Regarding economic policies, the party has also turned to the right. During the Soini’s period, the party followed the SMP legacy as a proponent of the disadvantaged groups as the ‘workers’ movement without socialism’, whereas the new leaders have promoted ‘welfare chauvinism’ and attacked the ‘exploiters of the welfare state as the enemy of the real hard-working people’ in the wake of immigration criticism (see Norocel, 2016).

The Finns Party has traditionally been the only openly Eurosceptic parliamentary party in Finland, although the Centre Party has also promoted Euroscepticism, especially in agricultural policies. However, compared to national elections, in which it has been the second or third largest party in Finland with 17.5–20.1% of the vote between 2011 and 2023, the Finns Party has had limited success in the EP elections (see Figure 1). In the 2019 EP election, the party obtained its best result

to date, with 13.8% of the vote, coming in fourth among Finland’s parties. After these elections, the party joined the new Identity and Democracy group, but it moved to the more moderate European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group in 2023 because they did not want to be identified with such political parties as France’s National Rally or Italy’s Lega, which were seen far too extreme in Finnish public discussions prior to the 2024 EP elections. In 2019–2024, the Finns Party had two members of the European Parliament (MEPs), Teuvo Hakkarainen and Laura Huhtasaari; as a country, Finland had 14 MEPs (as a result of Brexit, Finland now has 15 MEPs).

Figure 1. Electoral support for the Finns Party in Finnish parliamentary and EP elections (share of the vote, %)



Source: Election Statistics (2024a)

Because of geopolitics and its high dependence on European markets, Finland has been among the countries with the most favourable disposition towards the European Union (EU) in the twenty-first century. Based on the figure above, it seems that populist anti-immigration rhetoric and Euroscepticism do not take you as far in the EP elections as in national elections in Finland. In opinion polls, two-thirds of Finns have expressed positive thoughts about EU membership; however, only 22% of Finns Party supporters shared this attitude, and 58% of them were negatively disposed towards EU membership (YLE, 2023). In Finland, the voter turnout is much lower for the EP elections compared to national elections, which usually diminishes the share of the Finns Party’s vote because their voters channel the general disappointment and protest at politics and are therefore unsure of voting. In the 2019 EP elections, the turnout was 42.7% of the voter population living in Finland, whereas it was 72% in the 2023 parliamentary elections and 71.6% in the first round of the 2024 presidential elections.



The 2024 EP elections were very interesting in Finland because the Finns Party has been part of the right-wing government with the NC since 2023. Also, in April 2023, Finland joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Since entering government, the Finns Party has diminished its populism and promoted very right-wing economic policies based on strong austerity measures and considerable cuts to public spending thanks to its leader, Riikka Purra, who is currently the finance minister. According to polls, support for the Finns Party has decreased remarkably after the parliamentary elections. In the spring of 2024, the relationship between the government and workers became very polarized, with numerous strikes taking place in response to the government's actions.

The Finns Party has traditionally been the Eurosceptic party in Finnish EP elections, promoting an agenda opposed to the EU, immigration and climate change policies. However, concerning the war in Ukraine and NATO, the party has been in line with the position of the other major parties in Finland because the population strongly supports Ukraine and criticizes Putin's Russia. On this point, the Finns Party differs from the European far right, which has often supported Putin's regime and opposed NATO. Among the parties, the NC – which usually comes first in EP elections in Finland – has been the strongest supporter of the EU and NATO. The constellation of the NC and the Finns Party in government and the liberal Greens and the Left in opposition makes the analysis of the 2024 EP elections extremely interesting from the perspective of populism.

## Populist antagonism in the election campaign

EP elections are often seen as second-order elections because, in many countries, national and local issues take precedence over European ones during campaigning (see Reif & Schmitt, 1980). This is not completely true in Finland: in the EP elections, European issues are highlighted, even though they are discussed from a national angle (Herkman et al., 2024).

In total, 232 candidates registered to campaign across all Finnish political parties before the deadline of 10 May 2024. The Finns Party fielded 20 candidates, as did the other major parties. In the campaign, the opinion polls ranked the Finns Party third with an estimated 16%–17% of the vote. The time available for campaigning was rather short – no more than three or four weeks. The parties launched their election manifestos about six weeks before the election.

The Finns Party's manifesto, *Päätetään itse (Let's Make the Decisions Ourselves)*, was published on 24 April 2024. It was seen as milder compared to the past, as the party abandoned its long-term goal of withdrawing from the EU as 'unrealistic'. The manifesto recognized the benefits of the EU for Ukraine and the Common Market, even though it saw the euro as damaging for Finland. However, the document contained several familiar themes, such as a strong anti-immigration agenda, according to which asylum seekers should be sent to third countries outside Europe. The manifesto also criticized what it saw as the EU's unwise expansionism, failed income-transfer politics and eagerness to meddle in matters that are the preserve of the member states.

During the campaign, the Finns Party repeatedly criticized the recent regulation of plastic bottle tops as a striking example of 'stupid' EU policies, and it mocked the regulation in several comments, blog posts and YouTube videos. The previous leader and a key figure in the party, Jussi Halla-aho, argued in a campaign video that the EU makes decisions that do not consider national interests because European decision-makers are not interested in them. According to Halla-aho, a vote for the Finns Party would be a vote for the idea of Finland 'making the decisions ourselves'.

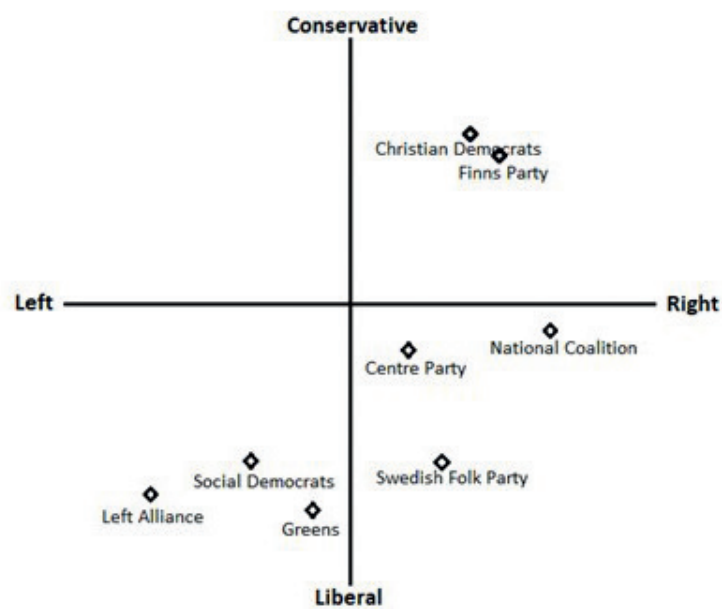
The Finns Party's status as a populist radical-right actor coloured the whole campaign of the 2024 EP elections in Finland, and an anti-populist struggle took place against them. The Social Democratic Party's (SDP) campaign slogan and manifesto title was *Jo riittää–pystymme parempaan (This Is Enough–We Can Make It Better)* in reference to the challenges to European unity, equal rights, the rule of law and the fight against climate change posed by the far right. The Left Alliance and the Greens spoke of the same issues in their campaign manifestos, underscoring their anti-populist and anti-far-right credentials. Interestingly, the NC, the party of the prime minister and one of the companions of the Finns Party in government, chose security as the most important theme in their election manifesto, entitled *Oikealla puolella Eurooppaa (On the Right Side of Europe)*, in addition to their traditional themes of the free market and innovation. In their program, security also meant strict border controls for asylum seekers that aligned with their long-standing Western orientation and support of NATO but also echoed the collaboration with the Finns Party in the governing cabinet.

Online candidate questionnaires<sup>1</sup> have been popular in Finland for several decades, and all major media outlets publish them during an election campaign



(Carlson & Strandberg, 2005). The most influential questionnaires are published by the public broadcaster YLE, the leading newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*, the oldest national commercial television channel MTV3, and national tabloid papers. The questions posed to candidates vary across the media outlets; however, their results are generally similar to the value map of YLE's questionnaire (see Figure 2, YLE, 2024a). Even if there is some variation among the candidates in a party, the value map demonstrates the clear differences among the parties in terms of their economic (left–right axis) and value orientations (conservative–liberal axis).

Figure 2. Parties' average positions on the value map of YLE's online candidate questionnaire



Source: Compiled by the author based on YLE's data and image (YLE, 2024a)

The more a party is on the right of the map, the more it supports the free market, and vice versa. The higher a party is on the map, the more it holds conservative values, and vice versa. By looking at Figure 2, one can see that the Finns Party and the Christian Democrats are the most conservative actors in Finnish politics, as well as the strongest proponents of the free market. Only their companion in government, the NC, is more to the right economically, although this party is more moderate in terms of values, making it a traditional representative of the centre-right. In contrast, the Social Democrats and the Greens are very liberal

1. These questionnaires help voters identify which political candidates or parties align most closely with their own views and values. These selectors typically ask users a series of questions on various political, economic, and social issues, then match their responses to the positions of candidates or parties.



and economically left-wing, together with the Left Alliance, which is even more to the left regarding the economy. The figure visually demonstrates how far apart the left–green camp and the Finns Party were in the 2024 EP election.

The same chasm was evident in the election debates aired by the major national television channels. Whereas the most important topic in the 2019 EP elections was climate change, which explains the success of the Greens at the time (Herkman et al., 2024: 103), in the 2024 elections, security was the key theme. This was due to the war in Ukraine and Russia’s influence on asylum seekers’ crossings on Finland’s eastern border. As mentioned above, the support for Ukraine in Finland has been almost unanimous among the country’s parties. Stricter border controls as a result of Russian operations have been supported even by the left–green parties, even though they have made some criticism concerning human rights. The focus on security made the Finns Party the agenda setter during the 2024 EP election campaign.

Despite this, the Finns Party was forced onto the defensive in other areas. Due to the predicted victory of the far right across the continent and its consequences for the EU, the media and the left–green parties constantly discussed these issues on the air. The Social Democrats based their campaign on attacking the far right for its damaging influence on European unity, the support for Ukraine, human rights, climate change policies and the principle of the rule of law. The Left Alliance and the Greens attacked the Finns Party on immigration and environmental issues, accusing it of representing the far right. The NC supported the government’s security policies, developed with the Finns Party, but it tried to keep out of the clash between the liberal opposition and the far right. In this situation, the Finns Party remained a ‘fringe populist movement’ (Herkman & Palonen, 2024: xxix).

The leader of the Finns Party, Riikka Purra, who is also the finance minister, had become a symbol of the government’s austerity policies, which created problems for the party during the campaign debates. Even though the party leaders tried to hold back in the debates, some party members had a more aggressive stance. For example, a well-known Finns Party MP, Sebastian Tynkkynen, used much more provocative rhetoric on immigration than Purra. This division of labour, according to which the leaders appear more moderate when there is a large audience while others are more aggressive in their communications with radical supporters, is typical of the populist radical right (Herkman, 2022: 77).

The populist radical right has often been seen as the political force that benefits the



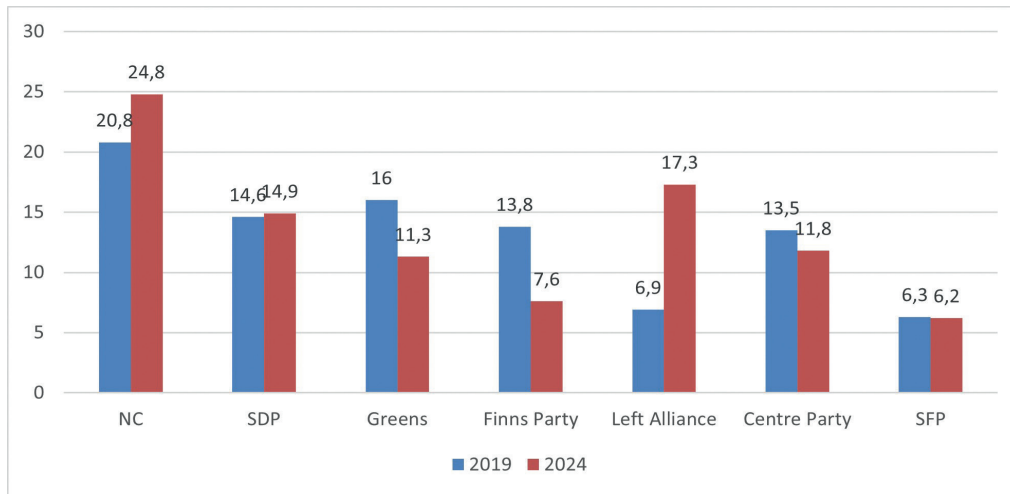
most from social media because these tools help them to use the double-speech strategy mentioned above, bypass journalistic scrutiny and appeal to hardcore far-right supporters (e.g., Krämer, 2017). The Finns Party has also been successful in its social media use, from Halla-aho's and Soini's blog posts to the more recent use of TikTok and Instagram by its MPs. Tynkkynen has a popular YouTube channel and successfully used Facebook in his campaigning. However, a study of Twitter use during the 2019 EP elections found that the most active tweeters were from the liberal, pro-EU camp and that Finns Party members mostly retweeted other people's content and commented aggressively on it (Herkman et al., 2024). During the 2024 EP elections, Palonen and Jokinen (2024) systematically monitored social media campaigns. According to them, the Finns Party was not particularly active. Social media debates focused on attacking the government, of which the Finns Party is a member.

## Surprising election results

In Finland, the 2024 EP elections were held on 9 June, but there was an advance voting period between 29 May and 4 June. The electoral district was the whole country for the 15 MEPs elected from Finland, who were chosen with the d'Hondt method. Some hoped the turnout would increase from the previous elections, and there was a significant increase in advance voting. However, in the end, the turnout was just below that of 2019, with 42.4% of those eligible in Finland casting their votes. The results surprised everyone because they differed radically from the polls, which are usually very reliable in Finland (see Figure 3).

As predicted, the NC took first place in the elections with 24.8% of the vote, gaining a couple of percentage points more than the polls had predicted and increasing its seats from three to four. The biggest surprise was the Left Alliance, which came in second with 17.3% of the vote and three seats (previously, they had only one). The Social Democrats were third (14.9%). The Finns Party was the most obvious loser, coming in sixth (7.6%), having taken 13.8% of the vote and fourth place in the 2019 elections.

Figure 3. Electoral support in the 2019 and 2024 EP elections in Finland by political party (% vote share)



Source: Election Statistics (2024b)

Overall, it seems that the government/opposition divide remarkably affected the election results. Although the prime minister’s party (the NC) came first, the opposition was arguably much more successful. The Left Alliance, SDP, Centre Party and Greens gained nine seats combined, whereas the NC, Finns Party and Swedish Folk Party obtained only six. Therefore, the 2024 EP elections in Finland reflected the voters’ dissatisfaction with the government’s policies. This dissatisfaction was evident not only in the decline of the Finns Party but also in the success of the liberal left–green bloc.

The media made sense of these surprising results in several ways. The main explanation for the victory of the Left Alliance was the remarkable success of its leader, Li Andersson, a 37-year-old female politician who had already attracted positive attention during Finland’s presidential elections in early 2024. Andersson has been a popular figure beyond party lines. In the EP elections, she alone received an astonishing 13.5% of the vote, and she brought two other party members to the EP with their relatively modest percentages. The defeat of the Finns Party was explained by their participation in government, especially that of their leader, Purra, who has become a symbol of painful cuts to public spending. Also, the low voter turnout may harm the Finns Party, whose voters are unsure about voting and prefer voting in the parliamentary and local elections – an effect of the Euroscepticism promoted by the party.

The Finns Party did not have previous MEPs as candidates because Laura Huhtasaari moved from the European to the national parliament after the 2023 parliamentary elections. Also, the party did not accept its previous MEP, Teuvo Hakkarainen, as their candidate for 2024 because he had received significant



negative attention for being very passive and incompetent. However, Hakkarainen campaigned as an unaffiliated candidate, and he received a significant number of votes, which also diminished the Finns Party's share. Interestingly, the party's most-voted candidate and only MEP for 2024–2029 was Sebastian Tynkkynen, who adopted a more provocative stance during the campaign compared to party leaders.

Finns Party voters' social and demographic characteristics have changed over the years. Initially, the party was supported by blue-collar workers, the unemployed and the disadvantaged. Today, its voters are mostly middle-class individuals and small entrepreneurs. This change has been due to the party's shift from the left to the right. In recent elections, its voters have come from average socioeconomic backgrounds, with a clear male preponderance (Isotalo et al., 2024). In the 2024 EP elections, the party received votes from all parts of Finland, but it lost its position as the most popular party in the northern and eastern parts of the country to the Centre Party. Traditionally, the latter dominated these provinces, but it lost them to the Finns Party in the 2023 parliamentary elections (YLE, 2024b).

## Conclusion

The 2024 EP elections were surprising in Finland. Despite the predictions, there was no victory for the populist radical right. The Finns Party obtained about half of the votes they won in the 2019 EP elections and only a third of those they received in the 2023 parliamentary election. The real winner was the Left Alliance with its leader, Li Andersson. This result revealed the people's dissatisfaction towards the government and the Finns Party's leader and finance minister, Riikka Purra, who has become a symbol of strict austerity and cuts to public spending.

However, even though the populist radical right failed, the overall context of the election was populist due to the strong antagonism between the Finns Party and the liberal left–green bloc (Herkman & Palonen, 2024, p. xxx). The Finns Party was backed into a corner due to its role in government, which all the opposition parties challenged. The most successful Finns Party candidate, Sebastian Tynkkynen, represented the provocative and radical faction of the party. Therefore, it seems that populism lives on in the anti-hegemonic challenger, whose approach did not help the Finns Party in the 2024 EP elections. Tynkkynen will join the ECR group in EP and continue critical activity on his social media channels. He announced that he would recruit assistants for social media campaigns during his MEP career to make the Finns Party voters aware of what is going on in the EU (YLE, 2024c).

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FRANCE



# A Tipping Point for Far-Right Populism in France

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## Abstract

The 2024 French European election took place against the backdrop of an economic and cost-of-living crisis in a context marked by global uncertainty arising from the war in Ukraine, social unrest and deep political discontent with President Emmanuel Macron. Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National (RN) emerged as the big winner with 31.4% of the vote, while Macron's Renaissance list trailed far behind at 14.6%. Meanwhile, Jean-Luc Mélenchon's left-wing populist La France Insoumise (LFI) won 9.9%, reflecting current internal dissent within the party and deep ideological divisions exposed by the Israel–Hamas war. National issues dominated the electoral agenda in June. Populist voting across both sides of the political spectrum was strongly fuelled by political discontent with Macron, making the 2024 European elections primarily a 'second-order' national election. A crucial test for Emmanuel Macron, the outcome of the European election led to the decision by the incumbent president to call a snap legislative election. The election confirmed the electoral strength of the RN; however, it showed the revitalization of the Republican Front against the far right, which blocked Le Pen's party from winning an absolute majority, delivering instead a hung parliament split into three blocks.

**Keywords:** *European elections; populism; France; Le Pen; Zemmour; Mélenchon*

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## Background

The 2024 French European election took place against the backdrop of the economic and cost-of-living crisis in a context marked by global uncertainty arising from the war in Ukraine, social unrest and deep political discontent with President Emmanuel Macron.

The European election showed substantial gains by populist parties, particularly on the right of the political axis, with Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National (RN) emerging as the big winner at 31.4% of the vote. The outcome of the European election led to the decision by Emmanuel Macron to dissolve the National Assembly. The snap election that immediately followed confirmed the electoral strength of the RN; however, it showed the revitalization of the traditional Republican Front (Front Républicain) against the far right by both parties and voters, which had been significantly weakened in the 2022 legislative election. This revival blocked Le Pen's party from winning an absolute majority, delivering a hung parliament split into three blocks, which more generally reflected the shape and increasing polarization of the French party system since 2017.

This chapter examines the strategies and performances of populist parties and the array of economic, cultural and political factors behind the rise in support for populism in France, particularly on the right of the political spectrum. Based on survey data, the analysis suggests that the 2024 French European election was primarily a 'second-order' national election fought on domestic issues, in which voters on both sides of the populist spectrum essentially expressed their political dissatisfaction with the incumbent president.

## A topography of populism in France

In Western Europe, populism is predominantly found in the radical left and radical right (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018). Reflecting such diversity, three main parties currently dominate the populist scene in France, namely Marine Le Pen's RN and Éric Zemmour's Reconquête on the right of the political spectrum, and Jean-Luc Mélenchon's La France Insoumise (LFI) on the left.

The RN exemplifies the typical radical right-wing variant of populism, operating on its core defining features of nativism and authoritarianism (Mudde, 2007; Pirro, 2022). The 2024 European campaign led by its popular young leader Jordan



Bardella emphasized typical RN nativist policies calling for a ‘stop to the immigration flood by controlling borders and expelling illegal immigrants’ and for ‘defence of the security and civilizational values of the French through zero tolerance and the deportation of foreign delinquents and Islamists’.

Under the leadership of Marine Le Pen, the RN has embraced ‘social populism’, namely, a mix of egalitarian social protection and economic nationalism (Ivaldi, 2023a) In the 2022 presidential election, this move allowed her to exploit the Russia–Ukraine War-related issues of energy and rising prices among working- and lower-middle-class voters most hit by the crisis (Ivaldi, 2023b). The cost of living was again a key issue in the RN’s communication strategy in the 2024 European election, where the party pledged to ‘lower electricity bills’ and ‘reject all European taxes on energy’. Meanwhile, the party continued its economic nationalist agenda, declaring it would ‘prioritize French companies in public procurement’. Riding the wave of discontent among French farmers, the RN also pledged to ‘put an end to punitive ecological policies and fight unfair competition’ to protect farmers’ interests.

Euroscepticism has been a central feature of the FN/RN in France since the mid-1990s (Hainsworth et al., 2004), tapping into a wide range of institutional, economic and cultural issues (Ivaldi, 2018a). Since 2017, the RN has moderated its positions and abandoned its previous policy of ‘Frexit’, adopting, however, a more ambiguous stance vis-à-vis the EU and de-emphasizing European issues to increase its appeal to moderate voters. The RN’s 2024 campaign reiterated the call for ‘a Europe of nations against Macron’s Europe’ while pledging to ‘put an end to European Union enlargement’ and preserve France’s ‘sovereignty and right of veto’ so that ‘no decisions could be made contrary to France’s vital interests’.

Éric Zemmour’s *Reconquête* shows a populist radical-right profile similar to the RN’s (Ivaldi, 2023a). A well-known political commentator, columnist and author, Zemmour entered national politics at the 2022 presidential election, making nativism and anti-Muslim rhetoric a centrepiece of his presidential bid. In 2024, the *Reconquête* campaign led by Marion Maréchal, a former member of the RN and Marine Le Pen’s niece, exhibited the central ideological tenets of nativism and authoritarianism alongside populism and Euroscepticism. The manifesto called for a halt to ‘the Islamization of Europe’ and pledged to erect a ‘naval blockade against immigration in the Mediterranean’ while explicitly endorsing the extreme right-wing idea of ‘remigration’ by promising to deport all illegal immigrants, criminals and ‘foreign Islamists’. *Reconquête*’s 2024 campaign was significantly hampered,



however, by growing disagreement between Zemmour and Maréchal over party strategy and a possible rapprochement with the RN.

On the other hand, Mélenchon's populist radical left LFI presents a universalistic profile, embracing a more socially inclusive notion of the people, which is essentially pitted against economic and political elites (Ivaldi, 2018b). LFI shows strong anti-establishment features, and its discourse and ideology illustrate radical left populist mobilization, which seeks to offer an alternative to the neoliberal hegemony. In June 2024, the campaign led by the party's young leader, Manon Aubry, strongly opposed austerity and advocated economic redistribution and public spending.

LFI's economic policies included higher taxes on capital, the expansion of public services, nationalizing the banking sector to fight speculation, raising the minimum wage and abolishing the 2023 pension reform to return the retirement age to 60. Additionally, the 2024 platform emphasized environmental issues and ecological transition policies, attesting to the more general 'greening' of the populist radical left in France since 2017. Like the RN, LFI has toned down its Euroscepticism in recent years, moving away from its previous call to leave the EU and that France should 'disobey' the European treaties to 'preserve the national sovereignty of the French people' (Ivaldi, 2018b).

LFI took a more radical course in the months before the election, however, reflecting Mélenchon's 'revolutionary' strategy and the controversial stances taken by the party's leadership concerning the Israel– Hamas war. Following the October 2023 attacks, Mélenchon came under fierce criticism for what was perceived as his ambiguous reaction to the events in Israel, declining to condemn Hamas as a terrorist group and adopting aggressive pro-Palestinian positions. Mélenchon and members of LFI were later accused of antisemitism and of fuelling political anger at Macron and the government while also targeting some of their allies in the newly formed left-wing alliance (New Ecological and Social People's Union, NUPES) in parliament. Mélenchon's strategy of radicalization caused enormous turmoil inside the party as prominent leaders such as François Ruffin openly expressed their criticism.

All three populist parties have made significant gains in recent national elections. The April 2022 presidential election saw a surge in electoral support for populism across the political spectrum (Perrineau, 2022). Le Pen won 23.2% of the presidential vote, coming in second place behind incumbent centrist President Emmanuel Macron (at 27.9%), progressing into the run-off where she received a

record high 41.5%. In the first round, Zemmour made a significant breakthrough at 7% of the total votes cast. Finally, Mélenchon came in third place with 22% of the vote, taking the lead on the left from the once-dominant Socialist Party (PS).

In the subsequent legislative election of June 2022, the RN received 18.7% of the vote and 89 seats, by far the best result ever achieved by the far right in France, making the RN the largest parliamentary opposition. Mélenchon's LFI was the dominant player within NUPES, which won a total of 26% of the vote and 157 seats, 75 of which were taken by the LFI.

## The context of the 2024 EP elections in France

The 2024 French European election took place against the backdrop of the economic crisis and the rising cost of living in a context marked by global uncertainty arising from the war in Ukraine, social unrest and deep political discontent with President Emmanuel Macron.

Politically, the European elections were located halfway through Macron's second presidency since April 2022, which had been significantly weakened by the loss of its absolute majority in the 2022 legislative election. Between 2022 and 2024, minority governments led by Élisabeth Borne and Gabriel Attal struggled to find agreements to pass legislation in an increasingly ideologically polarized parliament dominated by LFI and the RN. The Borne government was strongly criticized for repeatedly using the provisions of Article 49(3) of the Constitution, which allows bills to be passed without a vote. Political unrest culminated in March 2023 after the government used Article 49(3) to pass a highly unpopular law raising the retirement age from 62 to 64. Both LFI and the RN opposed the reform, which was overwhelmingly rejected by the French, resulting in mass demonstrations and strikes.

The new Attal government and Emmanuel Macron entered the 2024 election with low popularity ratings: in June, less than a quarter (24%) of the French said they 'trusted the president to handle the country's biggest problems'; the comparable figure for Prime Minister Attal was 29% (Elabe, 2024). The European election campaigns of both the RN and LFI tried and capitalized on such political discontent by making the election a referendum for or against Emmanuel Macron and the government, essentially emphasizing domestic concerns over European issues.

Economic fears clearly dominated the campaign, creating a propitious context



for populist politics across the board. According to polls, no fewer than 54% of French voters said the cost of living and purchasing power would be important to their vote. Meanwhile, immigration emerged as a salient issue for another 44%, followed by law and order at 26% (CEVIPOF, 2024a). This salience reflected growing public concerns over Islamist terrorism and debates surrounding immigrant integration in France following the urban riots of summer 2023 throughout the country. In December 2023, a vote for a new restrictive immigration law marked a significant shift to the right by the government. The law was widely seen as emulating the nativist policies of the RN, some of which had been brought into the draft bill by the mainstream right, attesting to the radical right turn of the *Républicains* (LR) under the leadership of *Éric Ciotti* (Ivaldi, 2024).

## Populist voting in the 2024 EP elections

The 2024 French European election saw a rise in electoral support for far-right populism. Turnout was 51.5%, representing a mere increase of about 1.4 points compared to five years earlier and very close to the European average (51.1%). *Le Pen* and *Bardella's RN* emerged as the big winner at 31.4% of the vote (up 8 percentage points compared to 2019), taking 30 of France's 81 seats in the European Parliament. *Macron's Renaissance* list came in a distant second at 14.6%. Meanwhile, *Mélenchon's* left-wing populist *LFI* won 9.9%, a gain of 3.6 percentage points on its previous result in the 2019 EP elections, which was, however, far lower than *Mélenchon's* performance in the 2022 presidential election. To the left, *LFI* was outperformed by the socialist list led by MEP *Raphaël Glucksmann* in alliance with his *Place Publique* movement, which came third with 13.8%. Finally, the *Reconquête* list led by *Maréchal* received 5.5% of the vote and five seats, making its first entry into the European Parliament.

Polling data confirm that the mix of economic insecurity, immigration fears, and political discontent with *Macron* may have created a 'perfect storm' for far-right populism in the 2024 French European election. Economic grievances and issues have been important factors in the electoral revitalization of far-right populism in France since the early 2010s. Support for the *FN* has been fuelled by feelings of economic alienation mediated by cultural concerns over immigration and strong anti-elite sentiments (Ivaldi, 2022). In the 2024 EP election, support for the *RN* was primarily motivated by immigration (77%), the cost of living (67%), and law and order (40%). Similarly, immigration (89%) and security issues (58%) were paramount to *Reconquête* voters, reflecting the typical far-right agenda. In contrast,

LFI voters said they were primarily concerned with the cost of living (61%), social inequalities (49%), and the environment (34%) (CEVIPOF, 2024a).

Polls indicate that the 2024 European election served as a referendum on Macron and the Attal government. Political protest and anti-incumbent sentiments were key to populist voting across the spectrum. While 39% of the French (36% in 2019) said they essentially voted to manifest their opposition to the president and the government, it was 53% among LFI voters, 54% in Reconquête, and no less than 68% among those who had turned to the RN (IPSOS, 2024a).

Finally, polls showed a different trade-off between domestic and European issues across voters. Overall, 45% of the electorate said they voted based on domestic concerns, a proportion like the one observed in 2019 (43%). To the left, LFI voters were like the national average at 45%. On the other hand, national issues clearly dominated the electoral agenda of far-right populist voters, with 62% of Reconquête voters and nearly three-quarters (73%) of RN voters saying these issues had been decisive at the ballot box. In contrast, European concerns were paramount to over 80% of Renaissance, socialist, and ecologist voters (IPSOS, 2024a).

Such differences were reflected in attitudes towards Europe, which varied significantly across parties. Overall, only 22% of the French said they opposed European integration, with a majority (57%) saying they supported Europe but would like it to take a different course. Opposition to the EU was substantially stronger among Reconquête (42%) and RN (43%) voters. On the other hand, LFI voters showed more positive views of Europe, with only 16% expressing opposition to further integration (CEVIPOF, 2024b).

With nearly a third of the vote, the RN list managed to attract voters across most socio-demographic groups. As in 2022, the RN closed the traditional radical-right gender gap (Durovic & Mayer, 2022), winning 32% and 30% of the vote among men and women, respectively. The Bardella list also did significantly better than the other parties among young voters under 25 years (25%). While consolidating its traditional working- and lower-middle-class constituencies – with no less than 54% of the vote among workers and 40% among white collars – the RN further widened its electoral base by making significant inroads in other occupational groups, winning 29% of the vote among technicians and associate professionals while also going neck-and-neck with the socialists among managers and professionals at 20% of the vote. Finally, the RN won no less than 29% of the vote among pensioners – up to 36%





among those from a lower social strata background – thus making significant gains in a group traditionally more resilient to far-right populism in France (IPSOS, 2024b).

To the left, the LFI list led by Manon Aubry essentially overperformed among young voters, receiving a third of the vote (33%) among those aged 18–24 years and 20% among those aged 25–34 years. This result may reflect the strong position taken by LFI on the war in Gaza, which emerged as one of the main concerns in those age groups (IPSOS, 2024b). The salience of the Israel–Hammas conflict was also confirmed by the extremely high level of support (64%) for LFI among the small group of self-declared Muslims in polls (CEVIPOF, 2024a), in line with Mélenchon’s appeal to voters from an immigrant background. More generally, LFI voters showed higher average educational attainment than their RN counterparts, and Aubry’s list achieved a higher level of support amongst voters with a university degree (15%).

## The snap legislative election

The outcome of the European election led to the unexpected decision by Emmanuel Macron to dissolve the National Assembly and call a snap election within three weeks despite anticipations of an RN victory and forecasts of a far-right absolute majority. Macron’s political gamble was seen as a strategic move to make parties and voters both face up to their own responsibilities in the event of an RN majority in parliament while also exposing the RN’s unpreparedness for government. Macron called upon the ‘silent majority of voters’ against the ‘disorder’ caused by radical parties (AFP, 2024), hoping to form a new centrist majority by aggregating the centre-left and centre-right against the immediate and tangible threat of the far right gaining power.

Within the extremely short pre-election period, tactical alliances were built across both sides of the political spectrum. Most notably, despite diverging positions on Europe, Gaza and Ukraine, the major parties of the left agreed to form a broad coalition dubbed the Nouveau Front Populaire (NFP), bringing together LFI, the Communist Party, the Greens and the Socialists together with Glucksmann’s Place Publique. While they had all competed individually in the European elections, the NFP member parties agreed to select single candidates (i.e., avoid running against one another) in almost all of France’s 577 constituencies, and there were few dissident left-wing candidates. The breakdown of NFP candidates showed that LFI remained the dominant force (229 candidates), followed by the socialists (175) and the Greens (92).

At the centre, Macron’s Renaissance movement rallied its previous allies in the

outgoing parliament inside his Ensemble coalition, i.e., François Bayrou's centrist Mouvement démocrate (MoDem) and Édouard Philippe's centre-right Horizons. Further to the right, the 2024 legislative election saw a notable reshuffling of the sub-party system. Éric Ciotti, head of the Republicans, struck an electoral pact with the RN, eventually running a total of 62 candidates with the far right under the new À Droite (To the Right) banner. Other LR leaders vehemently opposed such a decision, including Laurent Wauquiez, a close ally of Ciotti and hardliner within the party. This resulted in bitter infighting and the attempt by LR to expel Ciotti, which was overturned by a Paris court before the election. The Republicans entered the legislative election significantly divided and weakened, running candidates in 305 constituencies.

The results of the first round of the June legislative election showed a surge in voter turnout (to 66.7%), a substantial increase (about 19 percentage points) from the previous 2022 election, reflecting both voter desire for change after seven years of Macron's presidency, and growing fears of the far right getting closer to power. On election night, the RN was again the big winner, receiving 29.3 % of the vote – its best performance ever in a legislative election – to which one must add the 4% received by Ciotti's À Droite candidates, giving a total of about a third of the total vote cast for the far right. RN candidates topped the polls in 297 out of 577 constituencies, and they could progress to nearly all the second-round run-offs. This result confirmed the geographical spread of the RN vote across all regions of France, which had already been observed in the European election.

Further to the right, the results of the snap election showed the electoral marginalization of Éric Zemmour's Reconquête, reflecting growing intra-party dissent and disagreement over party strategy between Zemmour and Maréchal. Ahead of the first round, Maréchal was expelled from the party together with two other vice presidents – Guillaume Peltier and Nicolas Bay – after she had initiated talks with the RN leadership and had publicly called for a union of the two far-right parties. Reconquête entered the election independently and fielded 330 candidates who collectively polled a mere 0.75 % of the vote in the first round, making Zemmour's party politically irrelevant. To the left, the newly formed NFP came second at 28.5% and took the lead in 159 constituencies. Macron's Ensemble coalition finished third with 21.8% of the vote cast, topping the polls in 70 constituencies, essentially in the western part of the country and the more bourgeois areas inside and around Paris.

Legislative run-offs were fought in the 501 constituencies where two or more candidates had surpassed the institutional threshold of 12.5% of registered voters



to be allowed to progress into the second round. Between the two rounds, the traditional Republican Front – that is, the ad hoc alliances of parties and voters across the spectrum that coalesce whenever the RN is likely to win a decisive round – was revitalized, resulting in 217 candidates withdrawing from three-way races in their constituencies to reduce the chances of an RN victory.

The second round attested to the mobilization of voters against the far right. At 66.6%, voter participation rose to the highest level since the 1997 legislative elections (up from 53.8% in 2022). Between the two rounds, mass protests against the RN were a strong sign of growing public concern about the far right getting into power in France. The second round delivered a hung parliament divided into three blocks. The left-wing NFP secured the most seats after the second round, winning a total of 180, falling short, however, of the 289 seats needed for an overall majority. LFI lost its predominance inside the broad left-wing coalition, taking 72 seats, as opposed to 66 for the socialists and 38 for the Greens. Macron's centrist Ensemble alliance came third with 163 seats, down 87 seats from the already relative majority it had secured in the 2022 election.

The 2024 legislative election came as a disappointment for the RN after its historical first-round performance and the presence of its candidates in most second-round run-offs. With a total of 143 seats (including Ciotti's *À Droite* MPs), Le Pen's party fell well short of the absolute majority needed to form a government, although this represented a substantial increase in the total number of RN seats compared with 89 in the 2022 elections. Because of the Republican Front put forward by mainstream parties, the number of three-way run-offs featuring the RN and two other parties was reduced from 306 to 89, significantly impacting the outcome for the far right: the RN lost no fewer than 154 constituencies where it had taken the lead in the first round.

Other factors contributing to the RN's electoral setback included the party's poor credentials for government and the extreme right-wing profile of its candidates. The campaign exposed the RN's unpreparedness for the government despite the Matignon Plan – essentially a list of candidates for all 577 constituencies in the National Assembly – put forward in haste by Bardella just before the first round. The election was punctuated with hesitations and U-turns on some of the party's key economic and immigration policies, such as lowering the retirement age back to 60 and restricting access to public jobs for people with dual citizenship. Meanwhile, the media revealed that many of the RN candidates hastily brought to the campaign from the party rank-and-file had repeatedly posted racist, homophobic,

pro-Putin, COVID-19 denial and anti-Semitic comments on social media, casting doubt about Le Pen's claim that she had detoxified her party. Additionally, some RN candidates had links with violent ultra-nationalist organizations in France, and one of them was found to have a criminal record for armed robbery.

## Discussion and perspectives

The 2024 legislative election has left France in a political deadlock, delivering a hung parliament split into three blocks. The outcome of the 2024 European and legislative elections have more generally reflected the shape and increasing polarization of French politics since 2017; that is, a weakened yet still resilient centrist block squeezed between two radical alternatives on the left (LFI) and right (RN) of the party system. While parties of the left have managed to somewhat overcome their ideological and policy divergences, electoral support for the left remains relatively low, casting doubt about the possibility of a credible left-wing alternative while also attesting to the shift to the right that has taken place in French politics, a trend seen in many other European countries.

With an ever more fragmented parliament and no stable government in sight, the outcome of the 2024 elections will undoubtedly prolong uncertainty and political instability in a context marked by social unrest, growing economic anxiety and public debt and deficit. Such uncertainty will likely fuel electoral support for populism across the political spectrum in the forthcoming months, as economic and cultural fears will continue to top the political agenda. Macron and his centrist party face the challenge of building ad hoc alliances across ideologically diverse parties to pass legislation to address such concerns. Meanwhile, both LFI and the RN will need to work on their policy credibility, organization and membership to try and establish themselves as viable alternatives in the 2027 presidential election.

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GERMANY





# Germany's 2024 EP Elections: The Populist Challenge to the Progressive Coalition

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## Abstract

The 2024 European parliamentary election in Germany marked a significant shift in the political landscape, with devastating results for the governing coalition of the Social Democrats (SPD), the Greens, and the Liberal Democrats (FDP). Chancellor Scholz's SPD and the Greens experienced substantial losses, while the opposition Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) saw a modest increase in their vote share. The most notable gains were made by the populist radical-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the newly formed left-wing populist Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW), a breakaway from the Left (Die Linke), highlighting a growing demand for populist politics in Germany. The Left itself suffered heavy losses.

Despite internal scandals and controversies that contributed to a considerable drop in support in pre-election polls, the AfD leveraged anti-immigration sentiments and economic concerns to gain substantial support. The BSW capitalized on left-authoritarian positions, emphasizing welfare and anti-immigration policies. Both parties also criticized Germany's support for Ukraine and styled themselves as agents of 'peace'.

The election results underscored the unpopularity of the 'progressive coalition' in Germany and reflected the impact of high inflation, energy security concerns and contentious climate policies on voter behaviour. Voter turnout was the highest since 1979, indicating heightened political engagement. Like in previous elections, populist parties were much more successful in the post-communist eastern states. While its impact on the European level is limited, the election sent shock waves through Germany, suggesting a shift in future policy directions, particularly concerning the green transformation and relations with Russia.

**Keywords:** *Alternative for Germany (AfD); Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW); Germany; Russia; Ukraine; east-west differences*

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## Introduction and background

The result of the 2024 European parliamentary election in Germany was devastating for the governing three-party coalition of the Social Democrats (SPD), the Greens, and the Liberal Democrats (FDP). Chancellor Scholz's SPD lost 2 percentage points compared to the 2019 EP election, polling just 13.9%, the worst result for the party in any national election since the Second World War. The Greens, which had done exceedingly well in the 2019 'green wave', lost nearly half their votes and fell back to 11.9%. The Liberals lost only 0.2 percentage points, but their result of 5.2% put them precariously close to the electoral threshold that applies in national elections (although not in European ones).

Conversely, the main opposition Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) polled a combined 30%, a modest 1.1-percentage-point improvement on their 2019 result. While the result ensures they are the strongest party, it is low given both historical standards (they won 44.5% just 20 years ago) and the abysmal approval ratings of the government parties.

The combined vote share of these mainstream parties was just 61%. At least as far as perceptions were concerned, the big winner in these elections was the populist radical-right 'Alternative for Germany' (AfD, 15.9%), followed by the new left-wing populist 'Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance' (BSW, 6.2%). An additional 17% of the vote went to smaller parties, including the arguably populist 'Left' (2.7%), the arguably right-wing populist 'Free Voters' (FW, 2.7%), and 'The Party' (1.9%), a satirical outfit.

These results were almost perfectly in line with pre-election polls. The so-called 'progressive coalition' and its policies have been deeply unpopular almost from the get-go (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, n.d.), and the radical-right AfD has been the main beneficiary of this discontent. More specifically, after the initial rally-round-the-flag effect following Russia's renewed attack on Ukraine in February 2022, the government's popularity began to decline due to high inflation and worries about (energy) security.

In 2023, things went from bad to worse for the government and have not improved since. The coalition had planned to re-purpose unused special credit lines enacted during the pandemic to fund their programs for a green transformation of Germany's economy. The intention was to reconcile the Greens' ambitious plans for climate protection with the SPD's interest in expanding welfare and the FDP's

insistence on *not* declaring a ‘budgetary emergency’ for 2024. While such a declaration would have allowed the government to suspend the constitutional ‘debt brake’, abusing the older credit allowances to notionally comply with the deficit rules was a dubious move at best. Following a complaint by the Christian Democrats, Germany’s Constitutional Court declared the federal budget unconstitutional and void, throwing the coalition in disarray just six months before the election (Kinkartz, 2023). With no money left to paper over them, the fundamental conflicts within the coalition were laid bare.

Early in 2023, the Christian Democrats, alongside much of the media, had also launched a campaign against a government flagship policy aimed at reducing Germany’s CO2 emissions by accelerating the phasing out of older oil and natural gas heating systems. Subsequently, all of the opposition parties and much of the media framed this policy as ideological and removed from the lives of ordinary people, making heat pumps a part of the culture wars and forcing the government to water down its proposals.

As previous Christian Democrat-led governments had signed up to the relevant European and international rules and agreements and had enshrined in German law the very climate targets the policy was designed to meet, this was arguably a populist (in a broader sense) move by the main opposition, one that was happily supported by smaller opposition parties and even by some FDP MPs. Both mainstream and populist opposition parties also sided with large-scale farmers’ protests against some cuts to agrarian subsidies that eventually forced another government U-turn (Arzheimer, 2024).

Finally, Germany accepted more than a million Ukrainian refugees after Russia’s 2022 invasion. While this caused few large-scale problems, an ongoing and very public conflict over funding between the federal government, the state governments and the municipalities, as well as the Christian Democrats’ constant push for harsher rules and stricter enforcement, helped to bring the issue of immigration back onto the agenda in 2023, after its salience had been low for several years (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen n.d.). The Israel– Hamas war played only a minor role in the campaign, but a knife attack by an Afghan man on an anti-Islam activist that left a police officer dead just days before the election triggered a fresh debate about immigration, Islamism and the longstanding policy against deportations to Afghanistan (Deutsche Welle, 2024c).





Against this background, the result of the European elections was hardly surprising. Nonetheless, it sent shock waves through the German polity that still reverberate.

## The supply side: populist parties in the ascendancy

### *Alternative for Germany*

The AfD was founded in 2013 as a right-of-centre, soft-Eurosceptic outfit that presented an 'alternative' to the bailout policies that followed the 2010–2011 Eurozone crisis (Arzheimer, 2015). It quickly transformed into a characteristic radical-right populist party that attracted the prototypical electorate (Arzheimer & Berning, 2019). While many radical-right parties are striving to soften their public image, the most radical faction has dominated the AfD since 2017 (Pytlas & Biehler, 2023), and the AfD embraces openly extremist actors both within and outside the party (Arzheimer, 2019). As a consequence, the party as a whole is under surveillance by the domestic intelligence agency, and its youth wing, as well as several state branches, have already been classified as right-wing extremist. Like many other far-right parties in Europe, the AfD also has a longstanding association with Russia and has repeatedly voiced sympathy for Putin and his regime. Although the party toned down its statements immediately after the February 2022 invasion, it has since highlighted the economic consequences of the war and the sanctions for Germany and re-invented itself as a party of 'peace' (Arzheimer, 2023), even adopting the classic dove symbol in some of its publicity materials.

In the run-up to the 2024 European elections, the party floated the idea of including a call for the dissolution of the European Union in its manifesto and only dropped this idea from the final version after a public backlash. However, the selection of candidates was strongly influenced by the most radical elements within the party. The top spot of the list went to Maximilian Krah, a sitting MEP with well-documented connections to German right-wing extremists, Russia and particularly China. Krah's membership in the Identity and Democracy (ID) group had previously been suspended over allegations of fraud (Dahm, 2023). Petr Bystron, the second on the list, was a sitting MP in Germany's Bundestag, known both for his extreme views, his fondness of conspiracy myths, and his support for Putin's Russia. Asked why he would give up his seat in the Bundestag to become an MEP, he said he needed to get to 'the source of the poison' (Fiedler, 2023).

In January 2024, the AfD's campaign got in trouble even before its official start. Investigative journalists reported on a meeting between representatives of the AfD, members of the extremist 'Identitarian movement', and potential donors. At the meeting, the participants had discussed plans for a 'remigration' – a euphemism for the expulsion of millions of immigrant-origin Germans. This story triggered a large-scale countermobilization, with hundreds of thousands of Germans taking to the streets to protest the AfD (Deutsche Welle, 2024a). These events contributed to a relative decline of AfD support in the polls, which had risen to an unprecedented 22% in December 2023 but dropped to around 17% over the next six weeks or so. It also negatively affected the relationship between the AfD and Marine Le Pen, who dominates the ID group in the European Parliament.

But this was just the beginning of the campaign's woes. Two months before the election, a Czech newspaper published audio files that strongly suggested that Bystron had received at least 20,000 euros from the Russian propaganda portal 'Voice of Europe'. As Bystron was a German MP at the time and vote buying is illegal in Germany, he quickly became the object of a full criminal investigation, which is still ongoing. Just a couple of days later, Krah's parliamentary offices were searched by the police, and one of his aides was arrested as an alleged Chinese spy. While Krah himself has not been charged so far, a preliminary probe into allegations that he sold his vote to China and Russia is still underway (Deutsche Welle, 2024b).

Things came to a head in mid-May when Krah played down the atrocities committed by the Waffen SS in countries occupied by Nazi Germany in an interview with an Italian journalist. In response, the whole AfD delegation in the EP was excluded from the ID group (Reuters, 2024). Krah resigned his seat on the AfD's national executive and was formally barred from speaking on the stump by the leadership, leading to the paradoxical situation that the campaign rolled on without the two top candidates.

As much of the AfD's activities are social media-centric anyway, it probably did not matter too much. The AfD continued to push their core issues – first and foremost immigration, but also the economic impact of the war on Germany, climate denialism and hard Euroscepticism – without too much regard for their invisible candidates.



### *The Left and the Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance*

The Left party is the product of a merger between the (primarily eastern) PDS, itself the successor of the GDR's former state party, and the WASG, a mostly western group that broke away from the SPD over welfare reforms enacted in the early 2000s (Hough et al., 2007). It is considered far left and populist (Rooduijn et al., 2023), although many in the party take a rather pragmatic approach to politics, especially at the local and regional levels.

Sahra Wagenknecht was arguably the party's most prominent, controversial and charismatic politician. She started out as an orthodox communist in the early 1990s, a position that left her isolated within a decidedly post-communist party even after she changed her views. She gladly embraced the role of the outsider. As a gifted and very telegenic public speaker, she has been one of the most frequently invited guests on political talk shows for decades, although she stands for minority positions within a minor party.

During the so-called immigration crisis of 2015–2016, Wagenknecht became a (moderate) immigration sceptic. In 2018, she helped launch a leftist network that brought together tens of thousands of supporters but collapsed when she abandoned it the following year instead of turning it into a personal party, as many had expected. Wagenknecht was also critical of the anti-COVID measures and began cultivating a sizeable audience on social media during the pandemic (MDR, 2024).

In 2021, Wagenknecht published a book that was widely seen as the manifesto of an upcoming political project. In it, she accused her party of pandering to a 'lifestyle left' while ignoring the concerns of true working-class voters: welfare and immigration.

The Left's reaction to Russia's attack then provided the final straw. The 2011 basic program stresses the party's links to the peace movement, highlights its 'internationalist' credentials and calls for the dissolution of NATO and a 'common security architecture' that would include Russia. However, the sheer scale of human suffering in Ukraine has led many in the Left to reconsider these positions. The Left's manifesto for the European elections reflects this ambiguity. On the one hand, the document is highly critical of the US and NATO and even claims that the eastern enlargement of NATO has 'contributed to the crisis' (Die Linke, n.d.: 65). On the other, it highlights Ukraine's right to self-defence, condemns the attack as a war crime, and demands that Russia withdraw its troops from Ukrainian territory (without specifying whether that includes Crimea). Wagenknecht, however, took a more clearly pro-Russian stance.

She routinely claims that the US and the collective West are blocking a peace agreement between Russia and Ukraine for reasons of their own.

In September 2023, Wagenknecht and her supporters in the Left's parliamentary registered the 'Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance — Reason and Justice' (BSW), which legally became a political party on 8 January 2024. Ten of the Left's 38 MPs in the Bundestag eventually joined the new group. Amongst state-level MPs and the rank-and-file, the rate of defections was much lower.

This new party created much interest amongst political observers even before it was formally founded because it was assumed that it would cater to the so-far neglected demand for left-authoritarian (i.e., pro-welfare but anti-immigrant) politics in Germany (Wagner et al., 2023). The EP election manifesto published in April 2024 (Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht, 2024) offers precisely that, dressed up in a populist fashion. The preamble blames politicians and EU elites for broken promises and ignoring the problems of ordinary citizens. The BSW wants to shrink the bureaucracy and, more importantly, the scope of the European Union by shifting back competencies to the member states.

At the same time and somewhat contradictory, they want the EU to enact higher minimum wages, higher corporate tax rates, stricter rules against money laundering, and limits on financial transactions. The BSW also demands new policies that would allegedly strengthen Europe's industrial base through a 'reasonable' approach to climate protection and securing access to cheap energy and raw materials. This policy is framed as a precondition for expanding welfare. The BSW also rejects future enlargements and wants to curb not just illegal migration but also the recruitment of qualified workers from outside the EU. Instead, the party wants to reduce the 'push factors' for immigration by creating more equitable conditions globally. While the rejection of Islam is more muted than in the AfD's statements, and while the AfD in turn keeps their most radical demands out of their manifesto, this is quite similar to the policies that the AfD offers.

However, the highest degree of overlap with the AfD can be seen in the BSW's approach to Russia's war on Ukraine. The sanctions, which are mentioned 14 times in a manifesto of 20 pages, are painted as harmful for Germany while having no effect on Russia itself. For the BSW, the attack on Ukraine is a 'proxy war' between the US and Russia (Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht, 2024: 14) that was 'started on a military level by Russia' but 'could have been prevented and stopped by the West'



(Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht, 2024: 17). The only (alleged) violations of international law that the manifesto addresses are the Western interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria (Ibid.). The BSW even adopts an idea that the AfD previously launched in parliament (AfD Fraktion im Bundestag, 2023: 3) – making support for Ukraine conditional on Kyiv's willingness to enter negotiations with Russia – albeit with a twist. It would incentivize Russia by offering to stop all military aid for Ukraine immediately should Russia agree to negotiate.

## Demand for populism in Germany

Taken together, the AfD (15.9%), Left (2.7%), and BSW (6.2%) achieved a significant (nearly 25%) share of the vote. Moreover, at 64.8%, turnout was the highest since the EP's first direct election in 1979, which suggests a high degree of interest and political involvement. Put differently, there is considerable demand for populist politics in Germany, even if the level is still lower than in France or Italy.

In line with second-order-election theory (Reif & Schmitt, 1980), domestic actors and attitudes (the unpopularity of the federal government in particular) dominated the campaign. In a post-election poll (see ZDF Heute, 2024), just 10% of the AfD's voters, 38% of the BSW's voters, but a massive 85% of the Left's remaining voters said that 'Europe' was more important for their decision than 'Germany'. This poll result suggests that AfD voters are (even) more inward-looking and fundamentally Eurosceptic than the BSW's.<sup>1</sup> The average across all parties was 47%.

However, the issues at stake (immigration, Russia's war against Ukraine, social and economic transformations) are international by nature and were often presented within a European frame of reference by the parties. Moreover, the AfD's ouster from the ID group, as well the overtures of the (German) president of the commission towards Giorgia Meloni and her European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group, helped to make this one of the most Europeanized EP elections ever.

Nonetheless, support for all three populist parties showed a striking geographical pattern that is very specific to German politics: they are much more successful in the eastern states (i.e., the territory of the former German Democratic Republic).

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1. The very high share of Left voters concerned with 'Europe' is in line with the party's radical left, yet internationalist outlook. However, one should bear in mind that the number of respondents in this group is very low.



Outside some university towns and the Berlin/Potsdam region, the AfD became the strongest party in all eastern districts and states, with state-wide results varying between 27.5% in Brandenburg and 31.8% in Saxony. In their heartlands in rural Saxony, they won up to 40% of the vote. Conversely, their best results in the western states were 14.7% in Baden-Württemberg and 15.7% in Saarland. There is no western district where they won more than 21%.

These lopsided results are hardly surprising: the multi-faceted legacy of the GDR, the shock and aftermath of the transformation in the 1990s and specific patterns of outmigration have led to a situation where individual levels of populism, nativism and place resentment — the feeling that one's locale does not get the recognition and resources it deserves — are substantively higher in the eastern states than in the west even decades after unification (Arzheimer & Bernemann, 2024). It is, however, important to note that AfD has made considerable inroads in the west of Germany, particularly in regions and even neighbourhoods that could be described as 'left behind'.

The AfD also drew more support from men (19%) than women (12%), a gender gap that has been stable since 2014, whereas gender differences for the Left and BSW were within the margin of error. For a decade, the AfD was a party of middle-aged voters that struggled to mobilize the very young and the elderly. The latter is still true, but for the first time, AfD support amongst the under-30s is now (just) above average. The Left remains somewhat more popular (6%) in this group than with older voters, while BSW support hardly varies with age.

In socio-structural terms, workers (25%) and voters with medium levels of education (23%) had the highest propensity to vote for the AfD. For the Left and the BSW, there are no clear patterns, but one must bear in mind that in national polls, relatively few of their voters are sampled. Exit polls also suggest that 29% of the BSW's voters had previously voted for the SPD and another 24% for the Left, while less than 10% were former AfD voters (Palzer, 2024). However, such transition analyses are fraught with methodological problems.

Across all respondents, the AfD remains deeply unpopular, with an average rating of -2.9 on a scale running from -5 to +5. The average values for the Left and BSW are -1.7 and -1.2, respectively. For comparison, the Greens, which have a smaller voter base than the AfD and are the least popular government party, receive a rating of -0.9. This suggests a considerable level of polarization between populist



(and particularly radical-right) voters on the one hand and the voters of non-populist parties on the other.

## Discussion and perspectives

Both the AfD and the BSW are nationalist parties, and the BSW, in particular, saw the EP election chiefly as an opportunity to gain media attention and access to public funds in preparation for the upcoming state elections. The AfD is still not welcome in the renamed ID (now Patriots for Europe, PflE) group and was forced to team up with a motley crew of fringe MEPs to reach the requisite number for forming a 'Europe of Sovereign Nations' group that gives them access to proper funding. BSW has not managed even that, and their MEPs are now sitting as Non-attached (NA). Nonetheless, both the AfD and the BSW will likely vote against any policies related to the green transformation or support for Ukraine and will push for 'negotiations' with – and closer economic ties to – Russia.

At least in the short term, however, their most significant impact will be on German politics. Their very strong results in the eastern states that just went to the polls will have dramatic consequences not just for the *Länder* in question but for Germany's system of decentralized and consensual policymaking, which could leave the country in uncharted waters.

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GREECE

# Economic Malaise and Political Discontent: An Analysis of the 2024 European Parliament Election in Greece

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## Abstract

The 2024 European Parliament (EP) election in Greece was held against a background of geopolitical instability in Europe's neighbourhood. However, domestic – rather than European – issues dominated the campaigns, including the economy, inflation and the cost-of-living crisis. The electoral results were primarily an anti-government protest vote and confirmed a trend of electoral fragmentation across the political spectrum. On the right, three relatively new far-right populist parties received parliamentary representation, i.e., the Greek Solution, Victory and the Voice of Reason. On the left, SYRIZA–PA maintained its second place, although its support declined substantively compared to the previous EP election. Course of Freedom and the KKE, on the other hand, were key electoral beneficiaries in the left-wing space. Younger age groups primarily opted for SYRIZA–PA, whereas older groups were more likely to support New Democracy. That said, far-right parties also received votes from younger generations. Geographically, the far right is more successful in the north of Greece. The key message of this election was political discontent and a general feeling of economic malaise posing dilemmas across the political spectrum.

**Keywords:** *elections; public opinion; populism; the left; the right; Greece*

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## Introduction

Greeks went to the polls on Sunday, 9 June 2024, to elect 21 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). Although a total of 31 parties competed for Greek citizens' votes, only eight received enough votes to reach the 3% electoral threshold for parliamentary representation. The elections were held against a background of geopolitical instability with the war in Ukraine and the conflict in Gaza. Yet, domestic questions, such as the economy, inflation and the cost-of-living crisis, influenced the vote.

The electoral results confirmed a trend of electoral fragmentation on both the left and right ends of the political spectrum despite the centre-right New Democracy retaining first place. On the right, three far-right parties with populist agendas, including Greek Solution, Victory and Voice of Reason, elected four MEPs in total. The substantive policies of these parties share several similarities, and their narratives are all based on a similar populist logic. However, their 2024 EP election campaigns prioritized different issues. Whereas Greek Solution talked more about its economic agenda and the cost-of-living crisis, Victory focused on religion and family, and Voice of Reason placed emphasis on Islam and the so-called 'woke culture'.

On the left, the Coalition of the Radical Left–Progressive Alliance (SYRIZA–PA) came second with approximately 15% of the vote, translating into four EP seats. The Communist Party of Greece (KKE) and the Course of Freedom secured two and one seats, respectively. These parties vary substantively in their policies. SYRIZA–PA put forward a centre-left agenda, Course of Freedom continued its anti-establishment rhetoric, and KKE maintained its communist agenda.

In what follows, I first analyse the policies of Greek populist parties on domestic and international issues. I then proceed to examine the electoral results, offering a glimpse into some socio-demographic and geographic patterns of the vote. I will finally conclude with some thoughts about the dilemmas presented to parties following the electoral results.

## The 'supply-side' of Greek populism in the 2024 EP election

Greece has been characterized as a populist democracy (Pappas, 2014), in which populism tends to be observed across the party system and is expressed through blame-shifting and exclusivist narratives (Vasilopoulou et al., 2014). Greek populism



cuts across the left–right dimension and is generally concentrated among the political parties that reject the mainstream politics of the ‘old two-party system’ associated with the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) and New Democracy (Tsatsanis et al., 2018). Based on this distinction, this section discusses the ideologies and positions of six populist parties in Greece in the run-up to the 2024 EP election in Greece.

### ***Right-wing populism***

*Greek Solution (Ελληνική Λύση) – EP group: European Conservatives and Reformists*

The far-right populist Greek Solution was founded in 2016 by Kyriakos Velopoulos, a former member of the far-right Popular Orthodox Rally (Λαϊκός Ορθόδοξος Συναγερμός) and the centre-right New Democracy (Νέα Δημοκρατία).

The party rose to prominence amid Greek protests against the Prespa Agreement signed between Greece and North Macedonia to settle an enduring dispute between the two nations. During that time, other far-right parties in Greece were experiencing electoral decline, which favoured Greek Solution. For example, members of the Golden Dawn (Χρυσή Αυγή), an extreme right-wing party (Vasilopoulou & Halikiopoulou, 2015) were being indicted for running a criminal organization, and the Independent Greeks (Ανεξάρτητοι Έλληνες) had lost credibility among their voters for participating in an electoral coalition with the left-wing SYRIZA (Συνασπισμός της Ριζοσπαστικής Αριστεράς).

Greek Solution has a prominent anti-establishment narrative glorifying the ‘pure’ Greek people against the ‘evil’ and ‘corrupt’ Greek political elites. Its populist message is combined with an ethnonationalist rhetoric, which is said to derive its strength from ‘Hellenism’. The party’s core beliefs may be summarized by its focus on ‘Greece, religion, family’. During the 2024 EP election campaign, the party leader professed to ‘make Greece and Greeks proud again’, arguing that Greek Solution has ‘clean hands and clean ideas’ (Greek Solution, 2024a).

On the cultural dimension, Greek Solution is critical of immigration, and what it calls ‘the language of rights’ and ‘imposed’ multiculturalism (Greek Solution, 2024b). It is pro-Russian (Dimitropoulos 2022; Wondreys, 2023) and against compulsory vaccinations (in.gr, 2021). While not openly calling for a Greek exit from the European Union (EU), Greek Solution has a vision for a Europe of nation-states extending from Lisbon to Siberia that is Christian and includes Russia, i.e., what the party calls a ‘European Europe’ that gives veto power to all



member states (Greek Solution, 2024c). Despite its Eurosceptic position, the leader of Greek Solution argued that EP elections are very important because nine out of ten decisions made in the Greek Parliament derive from EU legislation and that, therefore, abstention would mean support for the national government (Greek Solution, 2024d).

On the economic dimension, the party offers a somewhat blurred policy combination of low taxation mixed with economic intervention and welfare chauvinism (Georgiadou & Mavropoulou, 2022). The party's EP election campaign primarily focused on the 'cost-of-living crisis' framed with a robust anti-establishment narrative. For example, they castigated the government, declaring that 'Greeks are hungry and poor, but politicians are rich'. In its pre-electoral campaign, the party also focused on the expressed needs and priorities of the primary economic sector, specifically agriculture. Its economic plan consisted of reducing food production costs to support farmers by removing fuel duty, flat taxes and investment in mining to subsidize free schemes for energy self-sufficiency across Greece. Interestingly, and contrary to the cultural model of far-right voting behaviour (Norris & Inglehart, 2019), Greek Solution's party leader attributes the rise of far-right parties to economic reasons, such as poverty, unemployment and the cost-of-living crisis (Greek Solution, 2024b).

*Democratic Patriotic Movement–Victory (Δημοκρατικό Πατριωτικό Κίνημα–Νίκη) – EP group: Non-Attached*

The far-right Victory was founded in 2019, shortly after the signing of the Prespa Agreement, which, it argues, has been a betrayal to the Greek people considering that there is only 'one' Macedonia, which is 'only Greek' (Victory, 2024). The party first competed in the 2023 general election and gained ten seats. It puts forward an ultra-conservative religious narrative premised on an ethnic conception of Greek national identity and a belief in the primacy of the church over the state.

Victory makes populist appeals differentiating between the 'good' Greek people (who are equated to the Greek nation) and the elites presented as 'gangs' that place their partisan interests over the 'sacred' national interest (Victory, 2024). The party rejects left–right ideology, suggests that parties have colluded against the Greek people and the Greek nation, and promises to 'free' Greece from these partisan interests. It calls for binding referendums on important questions, the removal of the electoral threshold, and the reduction of the size of the Greek Parliament from



350 to 200 deputies.

On the cultural dimension, the party opposes liberal values, is against minority rights, and talks about Greece's 'spiritual, biological and territorial self-destruction' (Victory, 2020). Its ideology is premised on a strong belief in the Orthodox Christian religious tradition. The party is careful to avoid criticisms that it strategically employs religion in its discourse and argues that 'We do not have a religion, we have faith'. Victory is firmly against LGBTQ+ rights and abortion, arguing that 'nature is law', and proposes to establish a 'Ministry of National Demographic Growth' that would 'ensure the biological future of the Greek nation in our ancestral land' (Victory, 2020b) and address issues related to family, childbirth, immigration and repatriation. To that end, the party promises birth subsidies, benefits for stay-at-home mothers with two or more children, and tax reductions for families. The party is prone to conspiracy theories, for example, arguing that LGBTQ+ Pride events are supported and subsidized by the US embassy, George Soros and international lobbies (Victory, 2024b). It is also against vaccinations (Newsbeast, 2023).

Victory's position towards the EU is rather blurry. The party appears to support a Greek exit from the EU so the country is 'free from its guardians', but it does not openly advocate for it. It suggests that Greece needs to focus first on being socially and economically stronger and praises the Visegrad countries (Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary) for promoting their national interests within the EU (Victory, 2020c). It is noticeable, however, that the EU was not a salient issue in the party's 2024 European manifesto, which focuses primarily on domestic issues, including measures to support family, population growth, cheap energy and rural communities. Victory is pro-Russian and criticizes Greece's support for Ukraine in the ongoing conflict.

The party has a staunch anti-globalization agenda, supports strategic investment in agriculture and Greek self-sufficiency in food and energy. While it supports low taxation for both businesses and households, it proposes tax increases on banks and multinational corporations as well as on money transfers to other countries.

*Voice of Reason (Φωνή Λογικής) – EP group: Patriots for Europe*

Voice of Reason is a relatively new far-right party founded in 2023 by Afroditi Latinopoulou, a former New Democracy candidate. The party describes itself as a



contemporary patriotic movement that serves Greek identity and values, such as 'Homeland, religion, family'. Like Greek Solution and Victory, it portrays Greece in decline and seeks to appeal to the 'ordinary Greek' against the corrupt establishment. The party is against 'political correctness' and portrays itself as being censored from Greek media (Latinopoulou, 2024). Interestingly, although the party does not have any known links to the Spartans or the Golden Dawn, Latinopoulou criticized as anti-democratic the decision of the Greek Supreme Court to ban the Spartans from running in the 2024 EP election on suspicion they were being led by Ilias Kasidiaris, a former Golden Dawn member of the Greek Parliament currently serving a prison sentence for directing a criminal organization (Newsbreak, 2024).

The ideology of Voice of Reason draws inspiration from the so-called 'Great Replacement' theory. It argues that globalization, atheism, Muslim immigration and a rights discourse are replacing Greek culture and Christianity. It maintains that 'Brussels' is a pro-globalization entity whose decisions support global financial interests. The leader claims that she is in favour of a 'Europe of nations, not a Europe of illegal immigrants and rights' activists' (Danikas, 2024). According to the party, migration policy and the so-called 'woke culture' were at stake in the 2024 EP election (Voice of Reason, 2024). The party warns about the 'Islamization of Greece and Europe'. Its policy solutions consist of the deportation of illegal immigrants, the closing of Greek borders, and the relocation of reception centres for migrants outside Greece. The party is staunchly against the acceptance of non-heterosexual sexual orientations, same-sex marriage and adoption rights. It prioritizes demographic growth through measures that support the 'Greek' family.

### ***Left-wing populism***

*Coalition of the Radical Left–Progressive Alliance (Συνασπισμός της Ριζοσπαστικής Αριστεράς – Προοδευτική Συμμαχία, SYRIZA–PA) – EP group: The Left*

SYRIZA has been the main opposition party in Greece since 2019. The party was founded in 2004 and remained at the margins of the Greek party system until it rose to power during the Greek crisis. SYRIZA is a radical left populist party that critiques international capitalism and attempts to provide a socially just alternative to it. It is socially progressive, committed to equality and rights, and has historically put forward a version of soft Euroscepticism, criticizing the EU's democratic deficit. During the Greek crisis, it adopted a fervent populist rhetoric blaming domestic and international elites for the Greek crisis (Vasilopoulou et al., 2014). It embraced an anti-establishment protest strategy, arguing that a different – anti-

neoliberal – path was possible to take Greeks out of poverty and social exclusion.

After SYRIZA-PA's defeat in the 2023 national election, the party elected a new leader, Stefanos Kasselakis, a relatively unknown politician and a former banker. Kasselakis was elected on a ticket prioritizing transparency, justice, labour rights, progressive taxation, and LGBTQ+ rights. The transformation of the party following its new leadership remains to be seen, especially considering that it has led to ongoing debates and factional splits within the party. During the 2024 EP election campaign, the party refrained from strong anti-neoliberal rhetoric and instead talked about a 'progressive' political space. The party had a positive message asking Greeks to opt for SYRIZA-PA at the ballot box: 'For a better life, now'. Instead of an anti-establishment agenda, SYRIZA-PA talked about social protection, security and opportunities for all.

#### *Course of Freedom (Πλεύση Ελευθερίας) – EP group: Non-attached*

Course of Freedom is an anti-establishment political party founded in 2016 by former President of the Greek Parliament and SYRIZA MP Zoe Konstantopoulou. Its policy proposals are mixed, making it difficult to firmly place the party on the left–right spectrum. The leader explicitly argues: 'We look neither right nor left. We look forward' (CNN, 2024).

On the cultural dimension, the party puts forward an equality and inclusion agenda that tolerates differences and supports human, minority and LGBTQ+ rights (Course of Freedom, 2024b). It supports same-sex marriage and is pro-Palestinian (Chatzikonstantinou, 2024). At the same time, the party adopts a strong sovereigntist narrative seeking to appeal to 'popular conscience' with emotive language. For example, it demands reparations from Germany for the Second World War and seeks to 'shake off the yoke of the memorandum despotism, the totalitarianism of the Eurobureaucracy, the debtocracy, the bankocracy and the interests and oligarchies that support, feed and benefit from this anti-democratic regime' (Course of Freedom, 2024a). Course of Freedom has also been critical of the Prespa Agreement, appealing to nationalist voters opposed to austerity.

#### *Communist Party of Greece (Κομμουνιστικό Κόμμα Ελλάδας, ΚΚΕ) – EP group: Non-attached*

The KKE was founded in 1918 and is considered an orthodox communist party guided by the 'revolutionary worldview of Marxism–Leninism' (KKE, 2013). It is



among the few parties in Europe with such an ideological agenda that has maintained a persistent level of electoral success. In line with its communist ideology, the party rejects 'bourgeois democracy' and seeks to overthrow capitalism.

The KKE employs populism in its discourse (Hawkins et al., 2020). It has an anti-elite rhetoric arguing that Greek mainstream parties 'blackmail the people' and that New Democracy should be 'afraid of the people' (902.gr, 2024). On the cultural dimension, whereas KKE is tolerant of immigration, it is fervently against the decriminalization of drug use and exhibits culturally conservative attitudes towards LGBTQ+ rights, including same-sex marriage and adoption (Naftemporiki, 2024).

The party has a hard Eurosceptic stance, supporting Greece's exit from the EU. It views the EU as imperialistic, anti-democratic, capitalist and exploitative. It perceives the EU's impact on national sovereignty to be adverse and an impediment to social justice. In his pre-electoral speech, the party leader called the workers and the people to use their vote in order to 'raise a red flag against the EU, SYRIZA and PASOK', arguing that these parties satisfy the wishes of their 'exploiters' under the 'delusion' of social democracy (902.gr, 2024).

The KKE is also anti-American, anti-NATO and anti-EU. It is pro-Palestinian yet views the war in Ukraine as an imperialistic conflict between the 'bourgeois powers', i.e., the EU, NATO and the US, and 'capitalist Russia' (KKE, 2023). Economically, it proposes the nationalization of all industries and a centrally planned economy.

## The campaign context

The 2024 EP election occurred against the backdrop of public dissatisfaction with domestic politics. Based on a Pew Research Centre (2024) opinion poll conducted between January and March 2024, 53 % of Greek respondents reported an unfavourable view towards the EU, which was 3 percentage points higher compared to 2023 and the largest group across the European countries surveyed. The same poll reported that in Greece, in contrast to other EU member states, public Euroscepticism derives primarily from left-leaning citizens. In addition, satisfaction with democracy had dropped from 32 % in 2021 to 22 % in 2024 (Pew Research Centre, 2024b) and was – not for the first time – the lowest across the sample of European countries. It is therefore no surprise that citizen dissatisfaction with the government was prominent among the public. For example, only 35% of respondents thought that their vote in the EP election would change things in

Greece, 48% saw it as an opportunity to express protest (Alco, 2024), and 60% as a chance to vote against the government (To Vima, 2024).

Although public interest in the EP election was relatively high at 56% (Alco, 2024), national issues dominated the campaigns and were core to citizens' decision-making. When presented with a list of issues that would influence their vote in the 2024 EP elections, 53.4 % of respondents answered the cost-of-living crisis and the economy. Other issues included European issues (8.2%), security (7.8%), health (7.6%), foreign policy (6.9%), the Tempa train crash (a deadly head-on collision between two trains in the Thessaly region in 2023) (6.5%), education (2.9%) and same-sex marriage (2.9%) (To Vima, 2024). These responses reflected a feeling of general economic malaise. For example, according to a Metron Analysis survey conducted in May 2024, the top two most important issues facing the country included the cost-of-living crisis (40%) and the economy (27%) (Kathimerini, 2024a). Most parties also devoted their campaigns to national issues. Although there was no official pre-electoral TV debate, on 24 May 2024, there was an informal debate in the Greek Parliament during its last session prior to the EP election, where questions of inflation and the cost-of-living crisis also dominated.

Interestingly, according to the Youth and Democracy Eurobarometer (2024) survey, the top priority for young Greeks is fighting poverty and economic and social inequalities (45%, 9 percentage points above the EU average). This is followed by preserving peace, reinforcing international security and promoting international cooperation (35%), and promoting human rights, democracy and common European values (31%).

## Electoral results

Confirming the 'second-order' character of EP elections, only 41.39% of the electorate turned out to vote (table 1). Although this followed a general trend of declining turnout (Vasilopoulou & Halikiopoulou, 2012), turnout was particularly low in 2024, i.e., over 12 percentage points lower than the 2023 national election and over 17 percentage points lower than the 2019 EP election.

Prior to the election, New Democracy and SYRIZA-PA had set themselves specific goals. On the one hand, the leader of New Democracy claimed that he was aiming for the same electoral result as in 2019 (Reporter, 2024). On the other hand, SYRIZA-PA's Kasselakis claimed that he would be satisfied if his party gained over 20% of the





vote (EFSYN, 2024). Both leaders' claims failed to materialize, as the electoral result was overall one of electoral fragmentation both on the right and the left.

On the left, SYRIZA-PA's electoral result dropped compared to the previous national and EP elections to just under 15%. The KKE received 9.25% of the vote, translating into two MEPs. Lastly, Course of Freedom received 3.4% of the vote, remaining relatively stable compared to the 2023 national election. On the right, three political parties received parliamentary representation, including Greek Solution with 9.3 %, Victory with 4.37 % and Voice of Reason with 3.04%. Together these parties elected 4 out of 21 MEPs.

Table 1: Election results, Greece: EP 2019, National 2023, EP 2024

Party	EP 2019 % vote (seats won)	National 2023 % vote (seats won)	EP 2024 % vote (seats won)
New Democracy	33.12 (8)	40.56 (158)	28.31 (7)
SYRIZA-PA	23.75 (6)	17.83 (47)	14.92 (4)
PASOK-Movement for Change	7.72 (2)	11.84 (32)	12.79 (3)
KKE	5.35 (2)	7.69 (21)	9.25 (2)
Golden Dawn	4.87 (2)	-	-
Greek Solution	4.18 (1)	4.44 (12)	9.3 (2)
Victory	-	3.7 (10)	4.37 (1)
Course of Freedom	1.61 (0)	3.17 (8)	3.4 (1)
Voice of Reason	-	-	3.04 (1)
<b>Voter turnout (%)</b>	<b>58.69</b>	<b>53.74</b>	<b>41.39</b>

Source: <https://ekloges.ypes.gr/>

## The socio-demographics of the vote

There were no clear socio-demographic patterns of support for populist parties as defined by age and employment (Tables 2 and 3). Based on the exit poll (Kathimerini, 2024b), younger age groups primarily opted for SYRIZA-PA, whereas older groups were much more likely to support New Democracy. Course of Freedom benefited electorally from the youngest 17–24 age group. Young Greeks also opted for the far right going against the perception that these parties' strongholds are among the older generations. In fact, older people voted primarily for New Democracy. Whereas Greek Solution received the least votes from the 17–24 age group, Voice of Reason received its second-best outcome in the same group. In addition, Greek Solution was the third most preferred party among the 25–34 age group.

In terms of employment status, SYRIZA-PA attracted support from public and

private sector employees as well as pensioners. KKE was mostly successful among private sector employees and farmers. On the right, Greek Solution received significant support from farmers, which is consistent with the party's strategy to add to its ballot a female farmer from the north of Greece, Galato Alexandraki, who was elected as an MEP. Farmers, nonetheless, were quite fragmented in their political preferences also supporting the left-wing populist Course of Freedom. Pensioners were much less likely to opt for Greek Solution, Victory or Voice of Freedom. Victory was very successful among public sector employees, whereas private sector employees were the top group for Voice of Reason.

Table 2: 2024 EP election results by age group (% vote share)

	17-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
New Democracy	16.1	15.8	23.8	24.8	26.2	39.9
SYRIZA-PA	18.5	18	12.5	13.6	15.4	14.8
PASOK-KINAL	11.3	7.8	12.2	12.5	14.8	13.6
KKE	7.5	11.6	9.9	8	9.6	9.1
Greek Solution	6.2	9.8	7.8	11.3	10.2	8.5
Victory	5.1	4.9	4.5	6.1	4.5	2.9
Course of Freedom	9.8	4.5	4.2	3.6	2.5	2
Voice of Reason	5.4	4	5.9	4.3	2.8	0.6

Source: Exit poll Pulse, Alco, GPO, Marc, Metron Analysis, MRB

Table 3: 2024 EP election results by employment type (% vote share)

	Farmers	Self-employed	Public sector employees	Private sector employees	Pensioners
New Democracy	28.2	28.2	25.9	23	37.2
SYRIZA-PA	9	11.2	15.2	14.5	15.7
PASOK-KINAL	14.2	11.6	12	11	15
KKE	10.1	7.3	8.5	11.3	8.9
Greek Solution	12.9	9.7	8.3	11	8.6
Victory	0	3.1	7.7	4.1	2.6
Course of Freedom	6.5	3.9	3.4	3.3	2
Voice of Reason	3	4.1	4.1	4.6	0.6

Source: Exit poll Pulse, Alco, GPO, Marc, Metron Analysis, MRB

There is also an interesting geographic dimension to the far-right populist vote (for a European perspective, see also Ejr nas et al., 2024). In many districts in Northern Greece, these parties received above-average results. Specifically, Greek Solution came second in six electoral districts of the north, including Imathia (18.42%), Pella (17.28%), Kilkis (16.54%), Thessaloniki B (15.82%), Serres (15.64%), and Drama (15.52%).



## Conclusion

The key message of this election is political discontent and a general feeling of economic malaise. Citizen protest against the government and domestic issues, such as inflation, the economy and the cost-of-living crisis, dominated the 2024 EP election in Greece. The results confirmed a trend of fragmentation across the political spectrum, which poses dilemmas both on the right and the left. On the right, the strength of the populist far right limits the electoral potential of a centrist strategy for the centre-right New Democracy. If New Democracy were to move towards the centre, multiple contenders would likely contest for the political space to its right. At the same time the far right is also divided, and it is not clear whether these parties are willing to work together. On the left, there is a discussion on the possibility of SYRIZA–PA joining forces in order to be able to challenge New Democracy. This strategy is also not without complexity: for SYRIZA–PA, it might entail that the party fully loses its radical and populist appeal, whereas PASOK might be seen as disloyal towards its core voters.

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HUNGARY



# A Pyrrhic Victory for the Populist Right in Hungary

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## Abstract

The 2024 European Parliament (EP) elections have produced tectonic shifts in the Hungarian political landscape. While the populist governing party, Fidesz, secured first place in the elections, it lost two seats in the EP, and a new political force emerged that has reshuffled the power balance in Hungary's opposition. Additionally, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his party, along with the pro-government media and social media outlets, spent huge amounts to deliver the government's campaign messages, and the party reportedly broke mobilization records before the election. Orbán's campaign returned to the themes of the 2022 national parliamentary election and made the war in Ukraine its centrepiece. Although the initial campaign slogan was 'no migration, no gender, no war' and all three elements resonated with Fidesz voters the most, the last component has eclipsed the other two. Orbán used fear-mongering and built a Manichean narrative where anybody failing to vote for Fidesz was part of the 'pro-war' camp. He labelled all his domestic and international political opponents 'pro-war' and even claimed that the Hungarian opposition was carrying out the demands of its international financiers in Brussels and Washington. The radical right-wing Our Homeland (OH) focused more on the municipal election yet led a negative campaign against the EU, claiming that Brussels has fallen under the influence of globalists and international interest groups and seeks to build a federal superstate. OH also managed to send one MEP to Strasbourg. Overall, while both Fidesz and OH have joined separate, rebranded, right-wing Eurosceptic groups, their political isolation within the EP remains a challenge.

**Keywords:** *right-wing populism; Russia–Ukraine War; migration; gender; elites; Brussels; Soros*

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## Background

In January 2024, it seemed that elections for the European Parliament (EP) would not hold any great surprises. Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orbán and his populist Fidesz party were expected to gain a majority of the votes, potentially repeating their electoral success from five years before and securing the party a majority of Hungary's 21 EP seats. Also, it was expected that the radical right-wing populist Our Homeland (OH) party would potentially manage to send one representative to Strasbourg, given the historical success of radical Hungarian parties in European elections. After their defeat in the 2022 national parliamentary elections, opposition parties were still trying to come up with effective strategies to challenge Orbán's government, yet most struggled even to influence the political agenda. Given their repeated losses to Orbán's Fidesz, a growing number of the electorate became disillusioned with them and questioned their political credibility and capabilities. It was in this relative political tranquillity that a political scandal erupted, which eventually led to the emergence of a new political force that redrew the electoral map for Hungary.

In early February 2024 Katalin Novák, the president of the republic, found herself in a clemency scandal. The year before, she had granted a presidential pardon to someone who had helped cover up his superior's paedophile crimes by forcing one of the victims to withdraw his confession. The issue was extremely sensitive given the Orbán government's ongoing 'protect our children' campaign, which was used to mobilize against Hungary's LGBTQ+ community. Although President Novák resigned, as did the former justice minister, Judit Varga, who was supposed to lead the Fidesz party list in the EP elections and who also had to sign off on the pardon, the public never received a justification for the pardon and never got to know the person who initiated the process. After Varga resigned from leading the party in the EP elections, her former husband, Péter Magyar, began posting on social media about the alleged involvement of the government in the matter and criticized them for being too cowardly to sacrifice his former wife instead of those who were truly responsible. Although he initially denied any ambition to become a politician, his first interview on the YouTube channel, Partizán, received so much attention (in the interview, he revealed much of his insider experience as part of the government) that he eventually decided to venture into politics, and established a new party, Respect and Freedom (Tisza). Within a few months, he was touring around the country making speeches and decided to run in the EP elections, where candidates of the party were selected through online voting. Given Magyar's

previous involvement with Fidesz, the governing party had a hard time finding a political antidote to his challenge. For their part, the established opposition parties were caught in a bind as Magyar lacked the kind of credibility challenges vis-à-vis voters they themselves laboured under.

In the end, although Fidesz came in first in the EP elections with 44.82% of the votes, this result is the party's worst performance in an EP election. Pro-government commentators were quick to emphasize that the party received over 2 million votes, more than it had ever achieved before. This increase is largely attributed to the higher-than-average turnout, as the EP elections were held alongside municipal elections. However, this does not change the fact that the governing party (or coalition) has lost 2 seats in the EP and sent only 11 MEPs to Strasbourg. Magyar's Tisza received 29.6% of the votes and sent seven representatives to the EP. The leftist environmentalist coalition (DK–MSZP–P) managed to secure only two seats compared to their previous five (the DK had four, and the MSZP–P had one MEP). In the 2019 EP election, DK received 16.05% of the votes, whereas in 2024, the coalition managed to gain only 8.03%.

While the leftist coalition survived Tisza's challenge, the liberal Momentum did not. The party only received 3.7% of the votes and thus lost its two mandates in the EP. The radical right-wing populist OH doubled its support compared to 2019 and managed to secure one seat in the EP with a vote share of 6.71%. While 11 parties were competing for mandates, in the end, only 4 parties (or party coalitions) will represent the Hungarian people in Strasbourg.

## The supply side: Populist tropes featuring war and peace

The governing party, Fidesz (in coalition with the Christian Democratic People's Party or KDNP), started its EP campaign with Orbán's 15 March commemoration speech. There, he relied on his usual Eurosceptic populist tropes and claimed that 'Brussels has abandoned Europeans, and even turned against them' (Orbán, 2024) and that 'the people of Europe fear for their freedom in the face of Brussels' (Ibid.). He blamed the EU for wrongdoing and claimed that because of the incompetent leadership in Brussels, 'instead of peace, we have war, instead of security we have a rule-of-law ruckus, instead of prosperity we have financial blackmail' (Ibid.).





Later, Tamás Deutsch, a Fidesz MEP, summarized the party's criticism against 'Brussels' in ten points (Fidesz, 2 April 2024): its failure to manage the COVID-19 crisis; its incompetence in bringing a quick end to the Russia–Ukraine War, and its war-mongering; the European Green Deal; its position on and failure to curb illegal migration; a 'gender ideology' it imposes on member states; its failure to prevent Brexit; its rule-of-law 'jihad' against certain member states; incompetence that led to the collapse of the distribution of EU funds; pushing member states into debt, and; the Hungarian left that acts against the country in Brussels. Although Deutsch criticized the EU on its economic policies, its 'gender agenda', its rule-of-law procedures and migration policies occasionally during the campaign, the party's fundamental message was summarized in the campaign slogan: 'no migration, no gender, no war'. It was repeated so often at the beginning of the campaign that the mayor of a small village even posted it as a 'welcome sign' at the entrance to the village.

The slogan was supposed to reflect the various dimensions of the antagonistic relationship between the position of Fidesz and that of 'Brussels'. As Orbán put it:

They [i.e., Brussels] want to press us into a war, they want to saddle us with migrants, they want to re-educate our children. But we shall not go to war, we shall not let in migrants, and we shall not hand over our children (Orbán, 2024).

Orbán claimed to stop illegal migration into Hungary despite the EU's alleged liberal policies and called for 'resistance' to 'gender ideology' in the name of safeguarding Hungarian children against the alleged LGBTQ+ propaganda. Tamás Menczer, the party's communication officer, even argued that 'we shall never forget that the Hungarian left would destroy the peace and security of Hungary. They would bring us into the war, they would let migrants in, and they would let the gender propaganda loose' (Fidesz, 6 April 2024). While the first two elements of the campaign slogan featured in the social media messages of the governing party in the beginning, the third message, 'no war', gained ever-increasing attention in the party's campaign and ultimately eclipsed the other two. Pro-government social media influencers even went so far as to discuss the implications of a potential nuclear bomb in Budapest as a result of the war psychosis in Brussels and the West in general.

Orbán employed a pro-war versus pro-peace distinction, essentially a form of the Manichean division often utilized by populists. He applied this moral dichotomy not only to European politics but also to the Hungarian political scene. On the one hand, he claimed that:

Brussels is actually a prisoner of George Soros's network ... the Soros network is embedded in the European institutions – so much so that the European institutions are giving them money for their operations ... [T]hey're present within the Commission, they're in the European Parliament, and quite a few prime ministers are clearly Soros-backed people (Fidesz, 22 March 2024a).

Additionally, he also argued that 'the pro-war governments, the bureaucrats in Brussels [and] George Soros' network, are sending millions of dollars to the pro-war left in Budapest' (Fidesz, 19 April 2024). Deploying a typical populist narrative frame, Orbán not only criticized the EU for failing to listen to the people but also linked his domestic opposition with a malevolent elite. He and his party often pictured members of the different opposition parties conspiring with Brussels against Hungary, who were trying to push Hungary into the Ukraine–Russia War. In fact, most party figures who participated in the campaign actually claimed that the Hungarian opposition would enter the war because that is what 'their financiers' (Fidesz, 30 April 2024) are expecting from them. Among others, they claimed that 'the feeding channel, the umbilical cord of the Hungarian left is here in Brussels and America, so they are fed from here, financed from here, bought by the kilo' (Fidesz, 22 March 2024b). They often referred to Brussels and Washington as 'the paymasters of the Hungarian left' (Fidesz, 19 April 2024). Fidesz's messages frequently depicted prominent European politicians, from Emmanuel Macron to Manfred Weber and Ursula von der Leyen, as warmongers. These messages also highlighted their alleged Hungarian allies, including key opposition figures such as former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány, MEPs Klára Dobrev, Anna Donáth, Katalin Cseh and the new political actor, Péter Magyar. The claims about a pro-war Hungarian left were also repeated by Tamás Deutsch, Fidesz MEP, in the only televised debate where each party list leader of the EP election (altogether 11 parties) had 8 minutes to 'debate' with one another. Interestingly, the TikTok campaign of the governing party has never mentioned Russia as a responsible actor for the war in Ukraine, instead blaming European actors and NATO for escalating the conflict by supporting Ukraine with money and weapons. Throughout the campaign, it was unclear what Orbán and his party meant by 'peace' and how they would achieve it once their candidates appeared in the EP.

The campaign of the governing party appealed to the most basic fear of the population and constantly pictured the European Parliamentary elections as a decisive battle where people had to decide about war or peace, life or death, whether



one was willing to send his/her sons, grandchildren into the war. Although the social media campaign has built heavily on Orbán – who also toured the country himself, appearing unannounced in different places where he would talk to a selected audience – and his speeches and interviews, other party members also participated in the campaign. Most importantly, Deutsch and another MEP, András László, were quite active in conveying the party messages to the people, mainly about the war. Billboards were also widely used that featured the word ‘war’ made out of pictures of their domestic political opponents and George Soros. In contrast, they also had a billboard with the word ‘peace’ featuring Orbán in the background.

Overall, Orbán and Fidesz have crafted a populist narrative that positions themselves as the voice of peace, claiming to represent the people’s true interests. This narrative sharply contrasts them with all other domestic political actors and their supposed financiers in Brussels. The governmental parties, along with the pro-government social media influencer group Megafon, spent an enormous amount on social media campaigns—more than any other political force in Europe (Portfolio, 2024). In addition, at the ‘Peace March’ held a week before the election, Orbán promised a record-breaking mobilization, which he referred to as ‘the day of one million encounters’ (Fidesz, 5 June 2024).

Although the radical right-wing, populist OH party did not have a specific EP election manifesto, it campaigned with negative messages about the EU. László Toroczkai, the party head, blamed the EU for its undemocratic nature, its globalist agenda, its pursuit of a federal superstate, and its corrupt dealings. The party’s main message centred on the idea that Brussels had been captured by globalist, international interest groups. Interestingly, food safety was frequently highlighted in the party’s social media campaigns. While their primary focus was on the ‘state capture’ accusation against the EU, the party also emphasized issues related to migration into the EU, particularly stressing the security aspect. Their domestic political messages highlighted labour migration as a significant issue, with the party’s MP, Dóra Dúró, advocating for higher wages instead of relying on guest workers and criticizing the government’s strategy to build battery factories. The party’s emphasis on domestic issues was partly due to their greater focus on municipal elections rather than the EP election. With much more limited financial resources than Fidesz, their message distribution was also more restricted.

## The demand side: Older, less educated and rural populations as the mainstay of right-wing populism

As pointed out, Fidesz came out on top in the EP elections, even though it secured its worst result ever and effectively lost two mandates compared to 2019. In the capital, Budapest, the difference between the party and its primary challenger, Tisza, was 0.31%, yet in 9 out of 23 electoral districts, Magyar's party won. Within the counties, the relative dominance of Fidesz was more traceable: they won in each of the 19 counties, and their winning margin fluctuated between 27.67% (in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county) and 9.29% (in Pest county). Overall, there were 60 municipalities where Tisza received more votes than the governing party (Bódi and Kovalcsik, 2024), which must not be overstated, given that there are over 3,000 municipalities in the country. Interestingly, while OH came in second place in 17 of the 19 counties in the municipal elections, their vote share for the EP elections per county was much lower. Yet, compared to the party's 2019 results, they managed to double their vote share in every settlement size category.

Initial studies on the demographic composition of Fidesz voters have started to emerge. One analysis reveals a clear pattern: the lower the percentage of high school graduates in a municipality, the higher the vote share for Fidesz (Hajdu, 2024). This correlation between education level and support for the governing party is deeply rooted in broader socioeconomic conditions: areas with lower educational attainment typically have lower wages, leading to greater reliance on welfare programs. Another poll highlighted that 63% of Fidesz voters are aged 50 or older, compared to just 29% of Tisza voters in the same age group (Propeller, 2024). Additionally, 34% of Fidesz voters are 65 or older, indicating that a significant portion of the voting base is in retirement, reflecting their increased dependence on state support. This is consistent with Orbán's policies, which are consistently favourable towards pensioners.

Given that Fidesz's campaign revolved around the notion of war and peace, it is worth looking into how much this message was successfully distributed. Poll data suggests that the governing party was once again successful in creating a cleavage: while 77% of Fidesz voters would not have sent any assistance to Ukraine, only 29% of Tisza voters would have done the same (Molnár, 2024). This survey, unsurprisingly, also suggested a positive correlation between the level of schooling and readiness to send assistance to Ukraine.



Another poll focused on support for Hungary's EU membership just before the EP elections, aiming to assess the impact of Eurosceptic populist messages on public opinion regarding the country's role in the EU. The results showed that 51% supported and 32% somewhat supported EU membership overall. However, Fidesz voters were the least supportive: only 25% fully supported EU membership, with another 46% somewhat supportive. In contrast, Tisza voters overwhelmingly backed EU membership, with 83% fully supportive and 13% somewhat supportive (Király, 2024). The same poll also asked about the most pressing issues facing the EU. Unsurprisingly, given the campaign context, 65% of respondents identified the war as the most serious issue, overshadowing concerns like migration, climate change, economic disparities among member states, and an ageing population. Regarding migration, 65% of Fidesz voters saw migration into Hungary as a significant problem, while 81% of Tisza voters viewed emigration from Hungary as a more significant issue.

While no new polls have been conducted on public views regarding migration or gender – the other two main campaign themes of Fidesz – a 2022 poll revealed that Fidesz voters rated the seriousness of these issues at 4.4 and 4.0 on a 1–5 scale, respectively (D. Kovács & Bitá, 2022). These scores were above the national average, indicating that pro-government voters were more sensitive to these messages.

Overall, the data suggests that Fidesz voters tend to be older, less educated and rural residents. They are also more receptive to Eurosceptic rhetoric and resonate more strongly with issues related to migration, gender and the war in Ukraine.

## Conclusion and discussion

Despite the electoral success of Fidesz, this victory was essentially pyrrhic. Not only did the party record its worst performance in the history of EP elections in Hungary, but it only secured its 'victory' at great cost (money spent on social media, billboards, and the like) and ostensibly with a massive mobilization campaign. In comparison, Tisza did not spend much on social media, had no billboards, and lacked any mobilization strategy given the early phase of its party building (the party was effectively created a couple of months before the EP elections). Furthermore, despite one of the most significant victories across the EU, Orbán's party faced the challenge of allying with others on the European scene. Initially, the governing parties strived to join the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group led by Italy's prime minister, Georgia Meloni. Ultimately, Orbán rejected this



option because he did not want to sit with the anti-Hungarian Romanian party, Alliance for the Unity of Romanians. Additionally, there was a cleavage on the Russia–Ukraine War: not only Meloni and Jarosław Kaczyński but also smaller members of the ECR from Finland, Latvia and Lithuania, held diametrically opposed views to Orbán’s on the matter. Most of these parties overwhelmingly supported financial assistance to Ukraine.

After weeks of negotiations, Orbán succeeded in forming a new coalition based on the former Identity and Democracy group, initially with the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) and the Czech ANO, which was ultimately led by the French National Rally (RN). Although the new Patriots for Europe (Pfe) group is the third-largest faction in the EP, it could not secure any significant positions, and thus, Fidesz’s political isolation continues.

Little about the party’s objectives is known: a smaller European Parliament and correspondingly greater sovereignty for member states, a revision of the European Green Deal, and a more robust fight against illegal migration. Given that Hungary assumed the six-month rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union in July 2024, Fidesz is expected to pursue these objectives by putting them on the EU agenda. The extent to which Hungary can deliver on Fidesz’s objectives is yet another question, although Orbán’s international diplomatic meetings in the first weeks of July 2024 signalled his dedication to focusing on international matters. It is worth mentioning that Magyar’s Tisza has joined the European People’s Party (EPP). As a result, KDNP, Fidesz’s coalition partner, which remained in the EPP after Fidesz left the centre-right bloc in 2021, announced that they would also leave the EPP.

The far-right OH joined a new faction led by the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), whose leader visited his Hungarian counterpart, László Torockai, before the election. The Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN) only has 25 MEPs, so their influence, along with that of OH, remains marginal.

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IRELAND





# Ireland After the 2024 EP Elections: The Centre Holds ... Just About

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## Abstract

The 2024 European Parliament elections in Ireland came on the back of a rise in the prominence of immigration as an issue. Although Ireland had seen significant migration in the early to mid-2000s, the large number of migrants at this time had no significant impact on politics or voting. Nor was Ireland a country that saw any significant anti-EU sentiment. Thus, Ireland could be seen as an anomaly in Europe.

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a sudden rise in the numbers in Ireland seeking international protection (asylum seekers). Most of these came as a direct result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and again, Ireland saw a positive reaction to inward migration even though the country accommodated a comparatively high number of Ukrainian refugees per head of population despite the country's geographic distance.

There had previously been ethnonationalist parties on the ballot paper in European and national elections, but they had never really featured. In 2024 none got elected, although some did in the concurrent local elections. The vote for some explicitly populist ethnonationalist parties was greater than ever before. This result occurred partly because Sinn Féin, another populist–nationalist (but not wholly ethnonationalist) party, saw its support drop dramatically. It suggests, however, that Ireland may not remain the anomaly it has been. In all about a third of the voting electorate chose parties or candidates that can be categorized as populist.

**Keywords:** *migration; Ireland; populism; EU Pact on Migration; farmers*

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## Introduction

While electorally successful populism has always existed in Irish politics, the 2024 European election campaign and results in Ireland saw the emergence of a type of populism that had not hitherto been seen. Appeals, for instance, to a 'pure Irish people' that is distinct from a 'corrupt elite' are common not just in contemporary politics but in the nationalist politics on which the Irish state is founded. But there had never been an appetite in Ireland for any sort of 'othering' of migrants (or indeed other minorities). Although the results of the 2024 elections generally returned moderate, non-populist politicians, the centre parties' success belies the emergence of a stronger chauvinistic ethnonationalism, indicating a possible direction of travel towards increased levels of populism. This chapter will outline the existing and emerging populist parties present in Ireland and then set out the context of the rise of migration as an issue since Ireland's last general election in February 2020. This background leads into a discussion of the 2024 campaign, an outline of the results, and, finally, a discussion of trends.

## Populist parties in Ireland

For many years, Ireland was an anomaly in having no electorally successful, hardline-ethnonationalist populist outfit, as most other European countries have. The standard explanation for this absence is that Ireland has an established nationalist-populist party that is left-leaning and explicitly progressive (i.e., pro-migrant rights). In turn the reason for this might be that the narrative of Irish nationalism is 'small guy nationalism', given that the Irish 'story' is of forced emigration, with no 'great past' to which the country might return (O'Malley, 2008). Sinn Féin, an explicitly left-populist party, was directly linked to the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA), which killed thousands of people during the Troubles from the late 1960s to 1998. While much of that campaign of violence was clearly sectarian (and thus ethnonationalist), following its transition to normal politics in the aftermath of the Good Friday Agreement (also known as the Belfast Agreement) in 1998, Sinn Féin has espoused what it called 'civic nationalism', although it continues to champion a particular type of cultural nationalism that excludes those living in Northern Ireland who identify as British.

Sinn Féin was largely responsible for suppressing support for conservative ethnonationalism when immigration rose in the mid-2000s to where about 17% of the population in Ireland was foreign born (up from negligible levels in the early 1990s). It

opposed a referendum in 2004 to change the origin of citizenship from *jus soli* to one based on the child's heritage. Yet it remained outside the mainstream, being 'Eurocritical', opposing all new EU treaties, which because of Irish law must be passed by referendum. It was particularly critical of what it saw as the neoliberal bent of EU institutions.

Sinn Féin support rose in the 2010s as it adopted a more populist line. It adopted the policy approach led by small left-wing parties in opposing water charges, suggesting that the charges were a prelude to privatization designed to benefit elite supporters of the main governing party, Fine Gael. Sinn Féin used populist communications strategies to categorize Fine Gael and the main opposition party at the time, Fianna Fáil, as two sides of the same elite coin. There was some truth to this; these were not parties with strong ideological divisions, and in 2016, Fianna Fáil had signed a confidence and supply agreement to support a new minority Fine Gael government, enabling Fine Gael to remain in power.<sup>1</sup> Shortly before becoming the Sinn Féin leader, Mary Lou McDonald declared that that pact 'serves only to confirm the political establishment's indifference and inability to act in the interests of the many' (An Phoblacht, 2017). Sinn Féin and McDonald have frequently referred to the mainstream party leaders as 'the lads' or called them 'an old boys' club'.

One of the parties that had led the anti-water charges protests was People Before Profit (PBP), a small, Trotskyite, populist party with four Teachtaí Dála (TDs; MPs in English). It is an electoral front for the Socialist Workers' Party, although it also forms an alliance with the Socialist Party, whose electoral label is Solidarity. It had no seats in the EP, but Clare Daly of Independents4Change had been a member of Solidarity, leaving because it refused to work with Mick Wallace, who was then an independent TD. Both Daly and Wallace went on to take seats in the European Parliament, sitting with The Left group.

Because of the Irish electoral system, also used in Irish EP elections, many non-party or independent candidates run for elected office, more often than not using populist campaign styles.<sup>2</sup> One such MEP, Luke 'Ming' Flanagan, was first elected

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1. The abbreviation 'FFG' was coined to indicate that they – FF and FG – were essentially the same party.
  2. The Irish electoral system – Proportional Representation with a Single Transferable Vote (PR-STV) – asks voters to rank order the candidates, and transfers 'unused' votes to the next-preferred candidate. It allows voters to vote sincerely, so it facilitates candidates in smaller parties to get votes from people that they may not under other electoral systems. The system also allows individuals with no party affiliation to run. The requirements to get on the ballot for EP elections are very low (just 60 signatures, or a €1,800 deposit or the nomination of a registered political party).



to the EP as an independent candidate in 2014 on an explicitly anti-EU and anti-elite platform. His appearance and pronouncements were unconventional and anti-establishment. A member of The Left group in the EP, his voting record suggests he was concerned with protecting farmers' interests.

Independent Ireland, formed in November 2023 and comprising three TDs, calls for greater control of migration but opposes EU co-operation on migration as well as action to tackle climate change. It might be categorized as a farmers' party, but it also ran a candidate in Dublin whose main issue was migration. It describes itself as 'a party that puts our people first ... delivering on a program of reform and common-sense solutions' (Independent Ireland, 2024). Farmers had traditionally been a powerful lobby group in Ireland, with most Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil usually sympathetic to their needs. But the inclusion of the Greens in government since 2020 (as well as some legal requirements from Brussels) saw the government implement policies against the wishes of many farmers. Ireland successfully negotiated an opt-out on a nitrates directive, but that was a small win for farmers.

The other smaller parties that fielded candidates were more clearly of an extreme position. A group of parties ran candidates, all claiming to speak for the Irish people, and most of which subscribe to 'Great Replacement' theories. Although they ran as separate parties, many voters would find it difficult to distinguish between the Irish Freedom Party (IFP), the National Party, Ireland First and The Irish People. The IFP's aim is to re-establish 'the national independence and sovereignty of Ireland and [restore] its national democracy by leaving the European Union', no easy task in a country that regularly boasts the highest level of approval for EU membership among all the member states (Irish Freedom Party, 2024). It hoped that it might be able to benefit from migration being a significant issue at the elections, focusing heavily on that issue. IFP is led by Herman Kelly, who had been the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) press officer in Brussels. IFP had fielded candidates in previous elections but with limited success.

The National Party had also fielded candidates before, yet polled miserably. As with most of these parties, it is socially conservative and emerged from the pro-life movement. Comically, it split in two ahead of the elections, with the two factions each running candidates under the same banner. In terms of presentation it appears fascistic, with the diminutive leader almost copying Adolf Hitler in his physical appearance. It displays textbook populism in its stance 'against the corrupt and amoral establishment who push replacement level immigration which will in time

completely destroy Irish nationality’ (National Party, 2024).

Ireland First is a new party, largely a vehicle for Derek Blighe, a self-styled ‘citizen journalist’, who became prominent during the 2023 anti-immigrant protests (detailed further below), including spreading videos that would seem to encourage the rioting in Dublin. It describes itself as centre-right; most observers would see it as conservative nationalist and clearly populist: ‘Career politicians have consistently let us down, and it is time for the people, the true backbone of Ireland, to take matters into their own hands’ (Ireland First, 2024).

The Irish People is the newest of these parties. It presented itself as a loose coalition of independent candidates working under a shared banner and agreed principles, including ‘supporting Family values, advocating for Free Speech, prioritizing Housing for Irish citizens, endorsing Sensible Immigration policies, maintaining Neutrality in international conflicts, ensuring Education is free from indoctrination, and supporting Rural and farming communities’ (The Irish People, 2024). It railed against what it sees as ‘extremist’ policies being implemented by the government using nationalist rhetoric normally reserved for parties such as Sinn Féin.

While it would be hard to identify these parties on a left–right spectrum, another populist party that emerged and was sometimes accused of being ‘far right’ is more clearly on the left economically. Aontú emerged as a splinter group from Sinn Féin over the party’s stance on abortion. The leader of Aontú was a Sinn Féin TD who was disciplined for opposing the repeal of a provision in the Irish constitution banning abortion. The party shares Sinn Féin’s focus on a united Ireland and left-leaning economic policies, which it styles as ‘economic justice’. However, its supporters clearly position themselves on the right of the political spectrum, possibly because of abortion (Red C, 2024).

## The 2020 general election and beyond

In the 2019 European elections Sinn Féin lost most of its seats and dropped seven percentage points in a performance that surprised most observers and has never been satisfactorily explained. Within the party the analysis was that it had become too angry and negative and not solutions-focused, but you could have argued it was this anger that saw the party rise in the polls. There seemed to be no obvious change in communications or electoral strategy in the following months. Nevertheless, seven months later, in the general election, the party’s support surged, becoming



marginally the most popular in terms of votes, and would have been clearly the most popular in terms of seats except that it had underestimated its likely support and fielded too few candidates to take advantage of its popularity.

Sinn Féin benefited from economic grievances, particularly housing-related ones (Cunningham and Marsh, 2021: 231–4). The party's increased vote share in 2020 was to a great extent the result of the medium-term strategy of linking Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael as the same party using the (somewhat pejorative) 'FFG' label mentioned above. So when voters came to think of an alternative to the existing government, it was difficult for Fianna Fáil to present itself as that alternative. The acuteness of the housing crisis also helped the party. Sinn Féin had campaigned vigorously on the housing issue, and it was this that brought it increased support among young progressive voters. Sinn Féin focused relentlessly on this issue, questioning whether the gains made from the country's strong economic growth could reach ordinary people. The party also used a strategy of associating Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil with a 'landlord class', something with powerful resonance in Ireland due to the country's nineteenth-century famine.

When the two parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, eventually formed a coalition government (together with the Green Party) in mid-2020, Sinn Féin doubled down on this rhetoric. It used its being the largest party in terms of votes to claim that somehow the party leader, Mary Lou McDonald, was nefariously denied the position of Taoiseach (prime minister). In tweets and other public communications, party supporters and representatives used language to deny that Micheál Martin was the rightful Taoiseach. They used hashtags such as #notmytaoiseach and spoke of McDonald as 'the people's choice'. This populist rhetoric was common in the subsequent years in opposition. And it worked. Although Fine Gael received a poll boost from its early handling of COVID-19, of which Sinn Féin was broadly supportive, Sinn Féin clearly became the largest party in voting intentions.

However, Sinn Féin also began to transition to become a more mainstream party, one that might be taken seriously as a prospective party of government. Walking this tightrope between populism and responsible party was to prove divisive for its supporters. Its mainstream position on COVID-19 probably led to the loss of some supporters, although individual party representatives were able to voice what many considered conspiracy theories on this issue without sanction by the party. In the months leading up to the EP elections, the party's finance spokesman spoke to financiers in London to reassure them that Sinn Féin would



not pose a threat to their interests. Mary Lou McDonald made a similar trip to Silicon Valley to reassure investors of her party's intentions.

While it could have gotten away with this – even if it would have criticized others for doing it – the party also changed or took more mainstream positions on other issues. It dropped plans to immediately implement a wealth tax and instead said it would refer it to a commission on taxation. It opposed the EU Nature Restoration Law, causing some internal party division and criticism from left-wing groups. Sinn Féin supported the government's referendum proposals to remove references to mothers and protections of marriage in the constitution, replaced instead by the vague concept of 'durable relationships'. When a groundswell of opposition to the proposed changes led to their defeat, some in Sinn Féin acknowledged that the party was out of step with the people. It also supported legislation on hate crimes, which opponents claimed could limit free speech. The party then changed its mind on the issue, indicating it would oppose in later stages the legislation it had earlier voted for. The party was then criticized for a series of shifts in position and accused of 'flip-flopping' by its opponents.

However, it was its position on migration for which Sinn Féin received most opprobrium. The increase in refugees following the Russian invasion of Ukraine put severe pressure on Irish homelessness services. A subsequent spike in migration from other places, the Middle East and North Africa especially, put significant pressure on the ability of the state to accommodate them in the middle of an already-existing housing crisis. In 2023 Ireland saw violent anti-immigrant protests as hotels and other buildings were being used to accommodate the increased numbers of applicants for international protection. The mainstream political reaction, including that of Sinn Féin and the small populist left parties such as PBP, was condemnatory – dismissing those protesting as 'far right' or being led by the 'far right'.

Sinn Féin's falling support, then, can be seen as the party's failure to hold together the coalition of supporters it had created since 2020. That coalition might be classified into three groups: anti-British nationalists who are most concerned about a united Ireland, young to middle-aged, less-educated 'losers from globalisation', and young left progressives who are most affected by the housing crisis. This coalition held together when the core issue was housing. But when migration was the focus of most media and public attention, the equivocal nature of the Sinn Féin response pleased none of these groups, the first two of which might have preferred to see the party oppose migration more clearly, whereas the last



group might have been appalled at such an anti-progressive stance.

Aontú was in a position to soak up some of Sinn Féin's faltering coalition. It more clearly called for controls on immigration and opposed the EU migration pact. It had scored some success in its referendum campaign opposing two new proposed amendments, one to redefine the traditional meaning of family and another to remove references to mothers from the constitution. Both were heavily defeated by voters. Aontú claimed to be 'the only party listening to the people' and campaigned on this line coming up to the EP elections.

With a riot in Dublin city centre in late 2023 and an increase in the importance of the migration issue, a political response and adverse fallout were inevitable. The minister for justice, Helen McEntee, was seen as ineffectual on the issue. Some media reports showed that Ireland had deported just 100 of the 7,300 failed asylum applicants since 2023. The government slowly started to shift its position, but when Leo Varadkar (Fine Gael leader and Taoiseach) stood down in April 2024, replaced by Simon Harris, there was an expectation that he might shift the government's position. Certainly the rhetoric from the government changed somewhat, although no specific shift in policy could be identified.

## The campaign for the 2024 EP elections

In opinion polls coming up to the EP election campaign migration rose as one of the main issues that respondents felt was important (the others mainly being housing and the cost of living). One of the most notable features of the polls was the fall in support for Sinn Féin. Much of this support appeared to be going to independent or small-party candidates rather than the mainstream parties. As there is a low threshold to get on the ballot, the ballot paper had a large number of candidates in each of the three constituencies (Dublin, 23 candidates for 4 seats; Ireland South, 23 candidates for 5 seats; and Midlands-North West, 26 candidates for 5 seats). The large number of candidates meant that they would inevitably split their vote and reduce their chances of exploiting the new salience of migration among the Irish electorate.

Sinn Féin had been vocally pro-migrant rights, but that message became more equivocal over time as some representatives acknowledged the pressure that recently arrived asylum seekers put on services. It tried to refocus public anger on the government, but its messaging was confused. In the run-up to and during the

campaign, Sinn Féin changed its emphasis on migration. It rejected criticism that it was for ‘open borders’, saying it opposed the EU Pact on Migration on the basis that the party ‘firmly believes that Ireland must retain our sovereignty over these matters if we are to have an immigration system that is fair, efficient, and enforced’ (Ó Laoghaire, 2024). This shift was seen as a response to the direct threat from chauvinist nationalism in the form of some microparties, some with fascist overtones and from independent candidates or from Independent Ireland. Anti-immigrant protests increased in scale and number and, at some of them, crowds waving Irish flags shouted: ‘Sinn Féin are traitors!’ These protesters were able to use nationalist rhetoric, which had previously tended to be pro-migrant, by referencing a centuries-old attempt to replace the Catholic native population in a series of ‘Plantations’. These groups then referred to a ‘great replacement’ through a ‘new plantation’. There was a sense that Sinn Féin, once masters of nationalist populism, was now losing to nationalist populism.

On other issues, populist parties such as Sinn Féin and PBP were more in tune with the public mood. All these parties had opposed what it saw as the weakening of Irish neutrality by consecutive governments’ involvement in military partnerships, such as the NATO Partnership for Peace and PESCO, a platform for member state co-operation in European defence. PBP is explicitly anti-EU because of what it sees as the Union’s ‘imperial agenda’ and support for neoliberalism. Both it and Sinn Féin took strong positions on the Israel– Hamas war, including calls for the expulsion of the Israeli ambassador. On the issue of the Russia–Ukraine War, PBP took positions that were less in tune with popular opinion and often seen as pro-Russian, including calls for Ukraine to enter peace talks. Sinn Féin’s position was more equivocal. Historically it was more aligned with Russia, often blaming the West for being unnecessarily aggressive toward Putin. The invasion of Ukraine meant that the party said it was fully behind the smaller country. But it continued to abstain on packages designed to support Ukraine in the EP.

Two of Independent Ireland’s three EP candidates were high-profile broadcasters, one a recently retired regional correspondent for the national broadcaster and another a late-night phone-in-show host – often referred to as a ‘shock jock’. Their high profile immediately made them contenders to take seats. Although some saw Independent Ireland as an extreme right-wing group, it regards itself as centrist (albeit with a conservative bent). Outside Dublin it campaigned on farming issues, being critical of EU regulations and ‘EU overreach’, and also spoke more fervently in favour of greater control of migration than other centrist parties.



## No seats for the new extremes, but ...

Although Fine Gael (the European People's Party-aligned governing party) lost vote share and one seat (down to four), it was relatively pleased with the outcome. At 20.8%, its vote share was slightly above the other centrist governing party, the Renew-aligned Fianna Fáil (20.4%), which gained two seats to equal Fine Gael's four seats. Most pleasing for them was that they both were well ahead of Sinn Féin. The most prominent populist party sitting with The Left group in the EP, Sinn Féin won a seat in two constituencies but lost their only seat in another. It polled just 11% of the first-preference vote, about the same as in 2019, but well down on its polling in the run-up to the elections. It lost most in rural constituencies.

Despite the significant support for independent candidates, two prominent outgoing MEPs lost their seats. Independents4Change MEPs polled almost 5% of the vote, but both Clare Daly and Mick Wallace suffered from splits in the populist, anti-establishment left vote. We can see also in vote transfer patterns that they were also probably hurt by the presence of anti-immigrant candidates customarily considered on the 'far right'. They also complained of a media campaign against them. The media had indeed been less than friendly to the pair in the aftermath of the Ukraine invasion and their pro-Russian analysis of that conflict. On the other hand, Luke 'Ming' Flanagan comfortably retained his seat.

The new party, Independent Ireland, polled well in two of the three constituencies, picking up a seat in Midlands-North West probably at the expense of Sinn Féin. The winning candidate chose to sit with the Renew Europe group in the EP, which caused some annoyance within the party, as Renew was seen as too mainstream. The smaller left and right populist parties mentioned above failed to win representation in the European Parliament, partly because their votes were split between too many candidates. However, parties and candidates that were aggressively anti-immigrant (so, excluding Independent Ireland) polled a collective 7%, higher than ever before. This result suggests that the immigration issue has a resonance at the polling booths in Ireland that was not previously expected.

## Discussion and perspectives

The unwinding of the voting coalition that had sustained Sinn Féin's popularity was the most notable outcome of the EP and local elections in June 2024. The impact on Sinn Féin's strategic choices is as yet not clear, but it is difficult to see

how the party can recover this vote while immigration remains a significant issue. The party admitted that immigration was the issue that had caused it difficulties, and within months of the result, published an immigration policy that was immediately criticized for ‘dog whistle’ politics. A post-election study shows that Sinn Féin voters did not regard migration as one of the top three issues in the European elections (Red C 2024). This is despite it being the second most important issue for voters overall. It suggests that the voters Sinn Féin has lost are those who thought about migration. Even if it ceases to be an issue, the party may have lost some of its anti-establishment reputation among a section of voters. In the EP it has tended to oppose many of the proposals coming from the European Commission, and that is unlikely to change in the medium term. However, the Sinn Féin member elected for Dublin is highly motivated by concern for climate change, and she might shift the party’s direction on issues such as the European Green Deal.

The Independent Ireland member elected to the Renew Europe group, Ciarán Mullooly, is unlikely to feel tied to any whip and will oppose environmental measures that curtail agriculture. The same will be true of ‘Ming’ Flanagan. If the relative success of the mainstream parties was prominent in the post-election analyses, it ignores the fact that Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil’s combined support is lower than it has ever been. At least 40% of the first-preference vote went to parties or candidates that can be uncontroversially labelled populist.

Moreover, populist sentiment is common in Ireland for those parties identified here as populist. Although attitudes toward migrants split these parties on a clear left–right basis, when it comes to statements such as ‘Most politicians only care about the interests of the rich and powerful’, those most likely to agree are supporters of Sinn Féin (74%), PBP-Solidarity (84%), Aontú (71%) and Independent Ireland (78%) compared to 40% for Fianna Fáil voters. Conspiracy theories associated with populism are also more likely to be believed by supporters of these parties; 38% of Sinn Féin supporters and 45% of Independent Ireland’s supporters agreed with the statement ‘A small, secret group of people is responsible for making all major decisions in world politics’. Furthermore, when it comes to trust in news sources, supporters of Sinn Féin (25%), PBP-Solidarity (24%), Aontú (13%) and Independent Ireland (25%) have the lowest levels of trust in the state broadcaster RTÉ.

This points to an available market for populist parties, particularly on the right. It seems that the problem is that support is divided between too many parties.





However, the emergence of a significant political leader might tie together some of the anti-migrant and anti-European sentiment that is out there to create a significant electoral force in the future.

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ITALY



# The Spectrum of Italian Populist Parties in the 2024 European Elections: A Shift in the Balance of Power on the Right

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## Abstract

Italy has historically been one of the strongest proponents of a united Europe. However, recent years have seen a rise in Euroscepticism within the country, with a notable increase in the electoral support for Eurosceptic parties. Have the 2024 elections confirmed or refuted this trend? Italy features a variety of populist parties, both on the right and on the left, each with different Eurogroup affiliations and varying positions on European integration. As a result, during the 2024 campaign, the parties adopted different strategies. The results of the 2024 elections highlight two significant trends: a decrease in turnout and the strengthened influence of Fratelli d'Italia, reflecting a sustained support for ideologies among Italian voters.

**Keywords:** *populism; Euroscepticism; Fratelli d'Italia; Lega; Forza Italia; Movimento 5 Stelle; European Parliament*

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## Populism and Euroscepticism in Italy: Diverse actors and perspectives

Italy is an intriguing case study for examining the role, characteristics and influence of populist parties within the European context. Its relevance is due to two primary reasons related to the role of populism in the country and the attitudes of its citizens and political elites towards Europe.

On the one hand, Italy has been described as a ‘populist paradise’ (Tarchi, 2015) due to the strong presence and variety of populist parties. Indeed, Italy hosts a spectrum of populist movements spanning both right and left ideologies (Biancalana, 2020). This diversity extends to the European stage, where, as we will see, populist parties not only exhibit varying levels of Europhilia and Euroscepticism but also belong to different groups. Notably, within the centre-right, three Italian parties fit the model of right-wing populism to varying degrees (albeit being quite different from each other): Forza Italia (FI), Lega (officially named Lega per Salvini premier) and Fratelli d’Italia (FdI). For instance, in the 2019–2024 legislature, FI was part of the European People’s Party (EPP) group, FdI was a member of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), presenting a more moderate stance than the Lega, which was part of Identity and Democracy (ID). Moreover, there was also a populist party leaning towards the left, the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S), standing among the Non-attached (NA) group of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) who do not belong to any of the recognized political groups.

On the other hand, Italy has been one of the most enthusiastic supporters of a united Europe, both at the elite level (Conti, 2017) and among the general populace (Isernia, 2008). However, it has recently become increasingly Eurosceptic (Brunazzo & Mascitelli, 2020).

### Italy as a populist paradise

Regarding populism, as mentioned, Italy has long been regarded as a testing ground for populism, earning it the designation of the ‘laboratory of populism’ (Tarchi, 2015). Various forms of populism coexist within the country, which we will briefly describe, also considering their relationship with Europe. As anticipated, the leading populist parties today are FdI, Lega, FI and the Movimento 5 Stelle. Collectively, these four parties secured 58.31% (Chamber of Deputies) of the vote



in the September 2022 general elections, highlighting the significant electoral strength of populism in contemporary Italy. These parties are characterized by varying degrees and types of both populism and Euroscepticism.

Scholars have categorized FdI in contrasting ways (see Bressanelli & de Candia, 2023 for a comprehensive review): post-fascist, radical-right populist and national conservative. Here, we will consider FdI as a radical right party with elements of populism and Euroscepticism (Donà, 2022). Established in 2012, the party traces its roots to the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), a neo-fascist party founded in 1946 by supporters of former dictator Benito Mussolini. Since 2017, FdI platforms have introduced elements of nationalism, nativism and authoritarianism, along with anti-European Union (EU) stances. FdI made its electoral breakthrough in the 2022 elections, securing 25,98% of the vote and entering government for the first time under the leadership of Giorgia Meloni. The party promotes an extreme right-wing ideology, defending a homogeneous populace against perceived threats, such as LGBTQ+ groups and immigrants, particularly from Muslim-majority countries.

In the international arena, FdI advocates for national sovereignty over supranational integration while maintaining a relatively moderate stance on opposition to the EU (see Conti, di Mauro & Memoli, 2021). FdI is affiliated with the more moderate ECR group in the European Parliament (EP), of which Meloni has been president since 2020. Within the ECR group, FdI actively participates in crucial decisions alongside mainstream political factions, collaborating with them while distinguishing itself from the more radical right and Eurosceptic ID group. However, FdI continues to engage in ideological battles on specific policies such as civil liberties, environmental issues, gender equality, and EU constitutional matters (Bressanelli & di Candia 2023).

The Lega, known as Lega Nord until December 2017, was founded in 1991. Initially, it was a regionalist party (Bulli & Tronconi, 2011) that strongly advocated for Northern Italy's interests and displayed ethnochauvinism towards Southern Italy, positioning itself against central political institutions. Since Matteo Salvini became party secretary in 2013, the Lega has shifted its focus to hostility towards immigration and European integration. Salvini's leadership transformed the Lega's claim and shifted the opposition to central political institutions from Rome to Brussels: the EU is portrayed as an enemy that deprives Italian citizens of resources and the freedom to determine their own destiny (Albertazzi et al., 2018; Brunazzo & Gilbert, 2017). Salvini has forged alliances with other right-wing populist



parties, including France's *Rassemblement National* (RN), which has been part of the same EP group: previously ID and currently the newly established group *Patriots for Europe* (Pfe). They both held Eurosceptic views and had previously opposed the euro. However, by 2019, the Lega had dropped the idea of Italy exiting the euro, following a similar shift by Marine Le Pen in 2017.

Silvio Berlusconi's FI was founded in December 1993 following the Tangentopoli corruption scandals. FI participated in the March 1994 general elections, securing 21,01% of the vote, heralding Berlusconi's emergence as a prominent figure in Italian politics. Berlusconi is frequently cited as an exemplar of right-wing populism (Fella & Ruzza, 2013). As a billionaire media mogul, he entered politics as an outsider, leveraging his television channels to directly appeal to the people, a strategy that foreshadowed figures like Thailand's Thaksin Shinawatra and Donald Trump in the United States. Historically, FI displayed ambivalent attitudes towards the EU (Conti, 2017) but has shifted towards a more pro-European stance in recent years. This transformation is partly attributed to the leadership change following Berlusconi's passing in 2023, with Antonio Tajani, a former president of the EP, assuming leadership of the party (Biancalana, Seddone & Gallina, 2024).

The M5S is the newest among Italian populist parties and the only one not positioned on the right (Ivaldi, Lanzone & Woods, 2017; Mosca & Tronconi, 2019). Founded in October 2009 by former comedian and blogger Beppe Grillo, the party gained significant electoral momentum in the 2013 general elections, securing 25,56% of the vote (Chiaromonte & de Sio, 2014). In the 2018 general election, the M5S further increased its support, capturing 32.68% of the vote and entering a populist coalition government with Salvini's Lega. After the collapse of the government with the Lega, the party formed a new government in partnership with the leftist Partito Democratico (PD). Between 2021 and 2022, the M5S joined Mario Draghi's technocratic 'grand' coalition government.

The M5S's relationship with Europe also reflects this fluidity and flexibility. In 2014, following its initial electoral success, the M5S campaigned against the euro, advocating for a referendum on Italy's exit from the eurozone and rejecting significant EU financial constraints like those imposed by the 'fiscal compact'. During the electoral campaign for the 2018 general elections, under a new leader, Luigi Di Maio, the M5S moderated its Eurosceptic stance, emphasizing that Italy's departure from the euro was neither imminent nor planned. Nevertheless, according to Conti, Di Mauro and Memoli's survey among MPs in 2019, when the M5S was

part of a coalition government with the Lega, it could be unequivocally categorized as Eurosceptic. Furthermore, in 2019, the M5S adopted more moderate and ambivalent positions (see Conti, Marangoni & Verzichelli, 2020).

Following the dissolution of the coalition with the Lega and its subsequent alliance with the PD, the M5S supported Ursula von der Leyen's appointment as president of the European Commission and endorsed the installation of a pro-European leader like Mario Draghi as Italy's prime minister in early 2021, signalling a shift towards pro-Europeanism. Indeed, after five years (2014–2019) in the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy group (created by Nigel Farage) and five years in the NA group, after the 2024 elections, it joined the GUE/NGL group, signalling a clear shift towards the left at the European level as well.

Against this backdrop, what were the main issues of the 2024 campaign? How did these parties perform in the 2024 elections? Before addressing these questions, let us analyse Italians' relationship with Europe.

## The Italian case: From Europhilia to Euroscepticism

Regarding the relationship between elites and citizens and Europe, we know that historically, Italy has been a staunch supporter of European integration, with EP elections reflecting a dominant narrative that views Europe as synonymous with peace, prosperity, and political stability (Brunazzo & Mascitelli, 2020). As one of the founding members of the EU, its membership has enjoyed wide support among the political elite and the general public alike. By the early 1990s, nearly all parties shared not only broad support for the integration process but also specific support for the EU. However, the 'permissive consensus' supporting EU integration has been replaced by a 'constraining dissensus' (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). Indeed, since the mid-1990s, the previous narrative has significantly shifted (Conti, Marangoni & Verzichelli, 2020), and both Italian citizens and political elites have become much more critical toward EU integration (Brunazzo & Mascitelli, 2020).

It has been argued that this shift is due to multiple crises, such as the financial and economic crises (including the transition to the single currency and, more recently, the Great Recession and subsequent austerity policies) and migration crises (specifically the so-called refugee crisis in 2015–2016), which have significantly



affected Italy and led to increased opposition to the EU. Consequently, a considerable electoral market for Eurosceptic parties has emerged, marking a notable departure from Italy's post-war Europhile stance and reflecting a more complex and divided perspective on European integration (Conti, di Mauro & Memoli, 2021).

This shift is exemplified by two events: the success of populist Eurosceptic parties in the general elections of March 2018 and the subsequent formation of a government by two Eurosceptic parties, the M5S and the Lega, marking a turning point in Italian history within the EU (Conti, Marangoni, & Verzichelli, 2020). The second event is the result of the 2019 EP elections, which highlighted the growing Euroscepticism within the country. The Eurosceptic Lega Nord, led by Matteo Salvini, won 34.26% of the vote. The M5S, also critical of the EU, especially the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), garnered 17.06%; for their part, FI won 8.78%, and the far-right nationalist party, FdI, received 6.44%. Have the 2024 elections confirmed or refuted this trend?

## Populist parties' campaign and issues

After five years of significant political and economic turbulence, including a general election (2022), three changes in government (the PD–M5S coalition in 2019–2021, the technocratic Draghi government in 2021–2022, and the Meloni administration starting from 2022), and multiple crises in which the EU played a notable role, such as the COVID-19 and energy crises, the 2024 European elections emerge as a crucial indicator of both internal power dynamics within Italy's party system and within the right-wing governing coalition, as well as their positions on Europe.

Consistent with its nationalist traits, FdI's program – entitled *Con Giorgia l'Italia cambia l'Europa* ('With Giorgia, Italy changes Europe') – emphasizes defending the identity of European peoples and nations, referencing Europe's 'Judeo-Christian roots'. In her final rally, consistent with her sovereigntist traits, the party leader and Prime Minister Meloni stressed that 'Europe must rediscover its historical role, focus on a few major issues, and leave other matters to national governments that do not need centralization' (Pinto 2024). Throughout the campaign, Meloni had to balance her dual role as prime minister, which requires international credibility and as a populist party leader, striving to maintain equilibrium between these positions.

Lega's campaign is markedly more Eurosceptic, echoing the slogan *'Più Italia, meno Europa'* ('More Italy, less Europe'), which, interestingly, was previously used by FI in the 2014 European elections. Lega's platform, *Programma elezioni europee 2024*, focused on halting the EU's technocratic and centralizing drift and restoring the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality. Key proposals include rejecting the European Green Deal, ending austerity policies and protecting Italian production chains. The campaign was further stirred by the controversial candidacy of General Vannacci, a very controversial figure who ran as an independent on Lega's lists. General Vannacci became known for his book *Il Mondo al Contrario* ('The world turned upside down'), published in 2023, which sparked significant backlash due to homophobic, racist and sexist content. Despite internal opposition, Vannacci received substantial support, securing over 530,000 preferences and leading in four out of five constituencies.

Forza Italia remains the most pro-European party, presenting a ten-point program – *Con noi al centro dell'Europa* ('With us at the heart of Europe') – that includes goals like 'building common defence and security' and 'reforming European treaties'. On 21 May, at a campaign event, FI's national secretary Antonio Tajani criticized Lega's Euroscepticism, remarking, 'When I hear "Less Europe", all beautiful things, but with no effectiveness and no logical sense' (Canepa, 2024), adding that without being part of a broader project, Italy risks being overwhelmed and rendered irrelevant. Interestingly, as mentioned, this slogan was used by FI ten years ago, indicating the party's softened positions vis-à-vis Europe over time.

In summary, on the right, Lega has sought to radicalize its stance to attract votes from those discontented with Meloni's institutionalization, whereas FI has positioned itself as the moderate pole.

On the contrary, the Movimento 5 Stelle aimed to attract votes from the left, focusing on peace and opposing arms to Ukraine. Its program, entitled *L'Italia che conta. Protagonisti in Europa* ('An Italy that counts: Protagonists in Europe'), emphasized anti-austerity measures, defence of the public healthcare system, anti-corruption efforts, environmental protection, and labour issues, including introducing a minimum wage and a 32-hour workweek.





## Results: Decreased Turnout and a Shift in the Balance of Power Among Populist Parties

The 2024 European elections in Italy revealed some significant trends. The first one is the decline in voter turnout, which dropped by over 6 percentage points compared to the 2019 European elections (48.31%, down from 54.50%). This decline continues a long-term trend: turnout was 85.65% in 1979, 81.07% in 1989, 69.76% in 1999, and 66.47% in 2009.

Moreover, it is worth noting that in previous years, Italy's voter turnout in European elections was consistently higher than the EU average. For instance, in 1979, Italy's turnout was 85.65% compared to the EU average of 61.99%, and this pattern continued through the 1980s and 1990s. By 2019, Italy's turnout was 54.50%, whereas the EU average was 50.66%. This trend ended in 2024, with Italy's turnout declining further to 48.31%, while the EU average increased to 51.07%. Nevertheless, despite this increase in abstentionism, the latest Eurobarometer survey (Standard Eurobarometer 101, April–May 2024) indicates that 50% of Italians 'tend to trust' the EU, compared to a European average of 49%.

Regarding the performance of populist parties, it is notable that all the parties in the centre-right governing coalition (FdI, FI, Lega) improved their results compared to the 2022 general elections, the most recent national election in Italy. This outcome is significant as the 'honeymoon' period of the government elected in 2022 could have been expected to wane, and populist parties in office in other countries lost votes. This result marks a consolidation of the approval of the Meloni government at the domestic level.

However, it is also worth comparing the 2024 results with those of 2019, the most recent European elections. In this respect, FdI significantly increased its vote share from 6.44% in the 2019 European elections to 28.76% in the 2024 European elections, even improving on its result from the 2022 general election (25.98%). Forza Italia also improved its vote share, rising from 8.78% in the 2019 European elections to 9.59% in the 2024 European elections. This positive outcome under Antonio Tajani, the new leader following Berlusconi's passing, indicates stable support within the electorate. In contrast, the Lega's vote share saw a notable change, declining dramatically from 34.26% in the 2019 European elections to 8.97% in 2024. It is worth noting that in the 2022 general elections, the party scored 8.79%.

Within the right-wing area, we observe a shift in the balance of power between Lega and FdI: Giorgia Meloni's party has become the strongest, while the Lega has declined. Concerning the 2022 general elections, data from the polling agency SWG (SWG 2024) shows indeed that there has been a shift of votes from other partners within the centre-right coalition towards FdI. While 68% of the votes FdI represent a confirmation of their 2022 vote, 16% come from the centre-right (8% from Lega and 8% from FI), and 16% come from other political areas (7% from other lists and 9% from abstention).

Conversely, the Movimento 5 Stelle experienced its worst performance in a national election in history. Its vote share dropped from 17.26% in the 2019 European elections to 9.98% in 2024. This result continues the decline observed in the 2022 general elections (15.43%). In the analysis of the Movimento 5 stelle electorate conducted by SWG, it is evident that only 40% of those who chose them in 2022 reaffirmed their choice in 2024. The remaining votes were distributed as follows: 13% voted for a centre-left party, 6% for a centre-right party, 6% for another party, and a significant 35% abstained from voting.

This result can be explained by the absence of prominent candidates on the lists, indicating that the Movimento 5 stelle failed to consolidate its political constituency. Additionally, the renewed bipolar competition in Italy between the right and left has significantly diminished the influence of a third party like the M5S. It is to be noted that the M5S shifted to the left over the years. However, left-wing voters likely feel better represented by other leftist parties, such as the PD and the Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra (AVS).

Table 1. Italian populist parties' results in the 2019 and 2024 European elections

	Type of populism	European group	2019 EP elections		2024 EP elections	
			Number of votes	Vote share	Number of votes	Vote share
<b>Lega</b>	right-wing	ID (2014-2019) Pfe (2024-)	9,175,208	34.26%	2,100,658	8.97%
<b>Movimento 5 stelle</b>	left-wing	NA (2014-2019) GUE/NGL (2024-)	4,569,089	17.26%	2,336,251	9.98%
<b>Forza Italia</b>	right-wing	EPP	2,351,673	8.78%	2,244,678	9.59%
<b>Fratelli d'Italia</b>	right-wing	ECR	1,726,189	6.44%	6,733,906	28.76%

"Forza Italia 2024 result includes the list Noi Moderati"

Source: Author's own elaboration of data from the Italian Ministry of the Interior



Finally, it is worth asking what the main differences between the populist parties are concerning the characteristics of their electorate. In this respect, a pre-electoral survey conducted by CISE (De Sio, Mannoni & Cataldi 2024) indicates that M5S voters differ from right-wing ones in terms of education. Right-wing parties are more popular among less-educated voters and have less support among university graduates. In contrast, the M5S draws strength from those with a secondary education. The party also receives considerable support from the unemployed, affirming its focus on social issues.

There are also some differences within the centre-right coalition (especially between FdI and Lega, the two parties whose power dynamics have reversed over the last few years), mainly regarding gender and social class. Concerning gender, FdI has a predominantly male profile, while Lega has a more female-oriented electorate. Regarding social class, the Lega is strong among the most disadvantaged classes (a relatively new trend for the Lega), while only 10% of FdI support comes from the lowest class, rising to 36% among the highest class. These figures indicate a strong complementarity between the two parties.

## Conclusions

In sum, regarding the impact of populism in these elections, we note that in the 2019 European elections, the combined vote share for the right-wing populist parties – Lega, FdI and FI – was 49,48%. By 2024, this total slightly decreased to 47,32%. Including the percentages for the M5S, we see that the total for populist parties was 66,74% in 2019 and plummeted to 57,3% in 2024. This figure underscores the stability of right-wing populism in Italy, demonstrating that right-wing populist parties have managed to retain a solid base of support among the electorate.

Also looking at the absolute votes, we note a decrease in the percentage of votes for populist parties, although the decrease varies when we consider right-wing populist parties separately from populist parties overall. The votes for right-wing populist parties decreased from about 13 million in 2019 to 11 million in 2024. Including the Movimento 5 Stelle, the votes for populist parties (both right and left) fell from nearly 18 million in 2019 to just over 13 million in 2024.

In summary, the results of the 2024 elections highlight two significant trends: a decrease in turnout (that affects even the populists) and the strengthened influence

of FdI, within the centre-right coalition. Right-wing populism is still prominent in Italy, reflecting a sustained support for right-wing populist ideologies among Italian voters.

Conversely, the steep decline of the M5S marks a critical point for the party, indicating a need for strategic reassessment and potential repositioning within the Italian political landscape. This decline could also indicate a return to bipolarity after the ‘electoral earthquake’ of 2013 (Chiaramonte & de Sio, 2014). In this new bipolar system, for the time being, FdI holds the lion’s share of the right-wing representation.

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LATVIA



# Populism and the 2024 European Parliament Election in Latvia

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## Abstract

Populism has been a feature of Latvia's political landscape since the 1990s. New insurgent parties have utilized increasingly anti-establishment rhetoric, often through intensive and innovative use of social media, to win seats in the Latvian parliament and even join government coalitions. However, European Parliament elections in Latvia have been comparatively free of populism. There are two main reasons for this. First, and most importantly, there is a broad pro-European consensus in Latvia. Membership in the European Union and NATO is central to all three Baltic nations' security strategy in light of growing threats from Russia. As a result, there is no serious Eurosceptic party in Latvia and no explicitly Eurosceptic politicians have ever been elected to the European Parliament from Latvia. Second, Latvia's voters tend to support serious, experienced politicians in European elections, believing that they are better placed to support Latvia's national interests in the European system. Party politics take second place in campaigning, with the focus being on the experience of candidates (after all, Latvia elected just nine MEPs in 2024) rather than policy differences. As a result, populist anti-elite rhetoric has less salience. This chapter will explore the extent to which the 2024 European Parliament election in Latvia has continued these trends.

**Keywords:** *Latvia; populism; European Parliament; Russia–Ukraine War; election campaign*

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## Introduction

Populism – understood here as a thin ideology magnifying a binary divide between the ‘pure people’ and a ‘corrupt elite’ (see Mudde 2004 and Stanley 2008) – has been a feature of Latvia’s political landscape since the 1990s. Both national parliamentary elections and local government elections have seen a broad bouillabaisse of populist parties campaigning, winning seats and even taking up local and national office. In contrast, European Parliament (EP) elections have been largely free from populist campaigning and few populists have won seats in the EP.

This analysis is divided into four main parts. The first section identifies the key contemporary populist parties in Latvia. The second part drills down on the supply side of the campaign, briefly outlining the nature of EP elections in Latvia, explaining why populists are more marginalized in this vote than in other elections in Latvia, and outlining key policy debates over the course of the campaign. The third section drills down on the electoral results (the demand side) and political manoeuvring following the 8 June poll. The final section reflects on the broader impact of the election on Latvian and European populist politics.

## Background

A broad variety of populist actors has populated Latvia’s political stage over the last few decades. Institutional weaknesses, internal feuding as well as a failure to deliver on (often outlandish) populist promises, have contributed to a steady rhythm of party collapse and construction. KPV LV (a Latvian abbreviation for ‘Who Owns the State?’) was formed in the run-up to the 2018 election, ran a fiercely populist anti-establishment campaign, and finished second with a vote share of 14.25% and 16 of 100 parliamentary seats. However, following the established Latvian populist pattern, the party imploded and collapsed within a few months of the election.

By the following parliamentary election in 2022, the populist vacuum had been filled by two new parties that won seats in the legislature. The For Stability! (Stabilitātei, S!) party, founded in 2021, appealed to Latvia’s significant Russian-speaking minority, which makes up around one-quarter of the electorate, while Latvia First (Latvija Pirmā Vietā, LPV) campaigned on a Trumpist national–populist platform that aimed to win both Latvian and Russian-speaking voters.<sup>1</sup> S! finished fifth, with a 6.8% share of the vote and 11 of the Latvian parliament’s 100 seats. LPV also polled above Latvia’s 5% threshold for parliamentary representation with 6.2% of votes and received nine seats.



S! benefitted from the collapse of support for the Harmony Social Democracy (Saskaņa Sociāldemokrātija, SSD) party, which had previously monopolized the Russian-speaking vote in Latvia. However, SSD was quick to speak out against Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which went against the general sentiment of Latvia's Russian speakers, who were either more uncertain of placing blame for the war on Russia or those having been exposed to Russian state propaganda, were supportive of Russia's actions. S! was quick to fill the void, walking a rhetorical tightrope of refusing to blame Russia and instead arguing for 'peace', as well as focusing on antivaccine and anti-establishment rhetoric.

LPV was founded in 2021 as a platform for Ainārs Šlesers, a serial political entrepreneur who has previously founded and led the New Party (Jaunā Partija, JP), Latvia's First Party (Latvijas Pirmā Partija, LPP), For a Good Latvia (Par Labu Latviju, PLL), the Šlesera Reform Party (Šlesera Reforma Partija, ŠRP) and United for Latvia (Vienoti Latvijai, VL), and previously served as a former deputy prime minister, economics minister and deputy mayor of the capital city of Rīga. LPV's 2022 electoral campaign focused on a sharp critique of the incumbent prime minister, Krišjānis Kariņš, and sitting president, Egils Levits (which they referred to as the 'Kariņš–Levits regime'), particularly focusing on their COVID-19-era policies and Latvia's stagnant economy. The party initially denounced Russia's invasion of Ukraine, even expelling the party's candidate for president, Jūlija Stepaņenko, from the party ranks after she refused to denounce the war. However, in subsequent years, the party has softened its stance, increasingly talking about the need for negotiations, peace and the renewal of economic relations with Russia.

Both S! and LPV have languished in parliamentary opposition since the 2022 parliamentary election. Latvia has never had a party representing Russian-speaking interests in a government coalition and Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine has made it even more unlikely that the pro-Kremlin S! could break this pattern. While LPV is more mainstream and critical of Russia on the Ukraine war issue, the party's founder and leader, Ainārs Šlesers, has long been identified as one of Latvia's three 'oligarchs'. Centrist parties have erected a cordon sanitaire around LPV. LPV's aggressive anti-establishment discourse has made it relatively easy for other parties to keep it out of coalition negotiations. The two parties' status in opposition gave their anti-establishment populist discourse greater authenticity. They dominated

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1. During one pre-election interview with LPV's leaders, Vilis Krištopāns (who did win a seat in the European Parliament) stated that he would always vote the same as Donald Trump on any issue.





the populist part of the EP election campaign. Latvia's mainstream public and private media focused their debates, interviews and media stories on those parties polling above 2% in public opinion surveys. Thus, S! and LPV were invited to participate in various broadcast debates and interviews, while the five other populist parties in the campaign were largely ignored.

Briefly, these other five populist parties were, first, the Sovereign Power (Suverēnā Vara, SV) party, which also primarily appealed to Russian speakers and was dominated by politicians that had previously been in the more centrist pro-Russian speaker SSD, as well as Jūlija Stepaņenko, who had been expelled from LPV for her refusal to denounce Russia's aggression in Ukraine. The New Latvian Union (Apvienība Jaunlatvieši, AJ) was a curious combination of experienced populists (such as Aldis Gobzems, who was KPV LV's prime ministerial candidate in the 2018 election) and failed Russian-speaking populists (such as Glorija Grevcova, who had been elected to parliament on the S! ticket in 2022 but was stripped of her seat in parliament having been found guilty of lying about her education and professional experience). Power and Strength of the Nation (Tautas Varas Spēks, TVS) was a political vehicle for Valentīns Jeremejevs, a Russian-speaking businessman who has long been seeking a place in Latvian politics. The populist Nation, Land, Stateness (Tauta, Zeme, Valstiskums, TZV) party was a minor nationalist outfit that recruited Aleksandrs Kiršteins, a prominent nationalist politician who had been expelled from the National Alliance party after an unsanctioned trip to China. Finally, the Centre Party (Centra Partija, CP) made clear that it was a political vehicle for politicians from more radical pro-Russia parties that had been barred from competing in the election. Despite its name, CP was the only authentically Eurosceptic party in the election, largely down to it featuring a long-running and unsuccessful Eurosceptic Latvian politician – Normunds Grostiņš – on its slate of candidates.

## The supply side

Populists have fared badly in Latvia's EP elections since 2004. There are two major reasons for this. First, Latvia has few seats in the EP – just nine (up from eight, after a reallocation of seats following Brexit) in 2024 – and Latvia's MEPs have a resultingly high profile in domestic politics.<sup>2</sup> As a result, Latvia's voters have tended to vote for sober, politically experienced personalities to represent Latvia's national (rather than party) interests in the EP. This pattern of voter behaviour is a structural weakness for populist parties that might have well-known personalities in their ranks but typically lack the gravitas of government experience that Latvia's voters

seek. Second, Euroscepticism is weak in Latvia. Kārlis Bukovskis (2018) has explained that this was down to the crucial role of the EU (and NATO) in guaranteeing Latvia's security as well as the visible role of EU funds in Latvia's economic development since 2004.

LPV was the only populist party participating in this election that was able to mitigate the political personality challenge. It did this by deploying two tactics. First, although the party's charismatic chairman, Ainārs Šlesers, did not stand for the EP, he appeared in most interviews alongside the lead candidates. Moreover, his surname was on the ballot as his son, Ričards Šlesers, was the third candidate on LPV's candidate list (although the younger Šlesers refused to take part in interviews or debates in the election campaign). Indeed, the party's official manifesto opened with the words 'vote for Šlesers' team' (Central Election Commission of Latvia, 2024a). Second, the party's lead candidate on the electoral list was Vilis Krištopāns, a former prime minister from the 1990s who moved to the US state of Florida in the early 2000s, having labelled Latvia a 'country of fools!' (*muļķu zeme!*).<sup>3</sup>

Populist parties campaigned around three key issues.<sup>4</sup> First, the war in Ukraine, both in military and economic terms, was the dominant theme in the election. A second dimension was mainstream politicians' supposed incompetence (or 'selling out') in defending Latvia's economic interests in Brussels. This perfidy was typically linked to domestic corruption and incompetence and was frequently accompanied by a criticism of the European Green Deal (particularly its potentially negative impact on Latvia's economy). A third theme concerned the defence of traditional family / Christian values versus progressive, liberal ideals in Brussels.

Latvia shares a 284-kilometre-long border with Russia and a 173-kilometre-long border with Belarus. As a result, Russia's military invasion of Ukraine in 2022 inevitably had a significant impact on Latvia's domestic and international politics. While Latvia's mainstream parties were united in denouncing Russia's actions,

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2. For example, Latvia's two longest serving prime ministers, Valdis Dombrovskis (prime minister from 2009–2014) and Krišjānis Kariņš (prime minister from 2019–2023), went straight from the European Parliament to the prime minister's office.

3. Indeed, LPV has doubled-down on Krištopāns' famous (in Latvia) comment, with party leader Šlesers tweeting in June 2024 that 'Vilis was right! Latvia is a country of fools, because politicians and civil servants consider the people to be fools' (Šlesers, 2024).

4. This discussion of party programs and policies draws from three key sources. First, the official programs each campaigning party submitted to Latvia's Central Election Commission (which have a 4,000-character limit to ensure equal treatment for all parties). Second, official political party home pages. Third, candidate debates and interviews drawn from television, radio, newspapers and news portals.



supporting international sanctions as well as military, humanitarian and financial support for Ukraine and increasing domestic military spending, re-introducing conscription and developing domestic military readiness, populist parties tended to adopt more ambivalent positions.

While LPV's leaders consistently denounced Russia's actions in Ukraine, they pushed for a more nuanced approach to Russia, arguing that the sanctions imposed by the EU were too harsh (particularly in their impact on Latvia) and that both Europe and the United States continued to have dealings with Russia – so why shouldn't Latvia? As to the issue of Ukraine joining the EU, LPV insisted that the high level of corruption in Ukraine meant that membership should be off the table (for the moment). S! insisted that Ukraine needs to fulfil the Copenhagen criteria for eligibility before it can be considered a member of the EU. S! also refused to identify Russia as the aggressor in the war, preferring to say both sides were at fault and that if elected to the EP, it would seek to create a new party group based on 'peace and diplomacy'. Indeed, S! argued that the war was irrelevant to the European Union (stating that it was a NATO issue), that the EU should limit assistance to Ukraine to the humanitarian sphere and generally sought to avoid entering into deeper discussions on the theme. S! even pushed for renewing energy imports from Russia, and its leaders similarly argued that the EU should compensate Latvia for the adverse economic impacts of the war. The smaller populist parties agreed with LPV and S! that the EU should share the costs of policing and securing Latvia's eastern border with Russia and Belarus. CP went further in stating that it would push for peace in Ukraine and continue the work of former MEP Tatjana Ždanoka (who has been charged with spying for Russia's FSB security service and was banned from competing in the 2024 elections).

The second major populist theme was a sharp denunciation of Latvia's MEPs and governing elite for their previous domestic and European economic policies. S! was typically harsh in its criticism, writing in its program that:

As part of the European Union, we have lost our self-esteem, our ability to protect our sovereign rights and our country's development opportunities. Today's European Union policy, which directly affects Latvia, is virtually incompatible with our country's development and prosperous future. The total economic poverty, bankruptcy of entrepreneurs, immigration policy, absence of a children's program, artificially inflated taxes and prices on energy resources are a direct signal that Latvia's future is at risk. (Central Election Commission of Latvia, 2024b)

LPV similarly argued that mainstream politicians have not defended Latvia's interests in Europe. AJ's program argued that the previous generation of Latvia's politicians was incompetent and corrupt, making 'boring' speeches in Brussels and allowing Latvia to join the EU on unfavourable terms, leading to the destruction of domestic industry and the economy. Indeed, AJ went so far as to argue that Latvia's underdevelopment was deliberately planned by EU politicians and civil servants alongside colluding national politicians. It stated that it would push for compensation from the EU for the damage done to Latvia, for example, by closing domestic sugar factories.<sup>5</sup> LPV particularly focused on the travails of the Rail Baltica project (a major infrastructure project constructing a north-south European gauge railway axis linking Latvia and the other two Baltic states to Poland). The European Green Deal was similarly criticized as being unrealistic and against Latvia's economic interests, as the country was already among the greenest and most environmentally clean in Europe.

Finally, the populist block of parties was sharply critical of Europe's progressive politics, arguing that the EU had been hijacked by pro-LGBTQ+ and Green groups and that they would correct this policy direction by focusing on traditional families (those with a mother and a father) and supporting core Christian values. SV argued that policies should favour traditional families over other forms of family. This issue was also connected to immigration – TZV argued that the EU should not be enlarged with people coming from alien non-Christian cultures. Antivaxxer tropes also appeared, for example, with AJ warning of a planned secret treaty between the EU and the World Health Organization (WHO) that would allow for pandemics to be declared at any time, as well as uncovering an alleged EU plan to destroy printed books in Latvian libraries.

S!'s criticism of the EU ultimately hinted at being open to the idea of Latvia leaving the EU if the conditions of membership were not favourable. When asked during the final pre-election debate on Latvian public television if Latvia should leave the EU and forge a closer relationship with Russia or Belarus, S!'s lead candidate Nikita Piņins answered, 'Only time will tell' (Latvian Public Media, 2024) while in an interview with Delfi TV, party leader Rošļikovs stated that 'if the EU continues to strangle Latvia – what's the point [of membership]?' (DelfiTV, 2024).

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5. Latvia's two sugar mills (in Jelgava and Liepāja) were closed in 2007 as part of a generously financed European Commission program aiming to cut unprofitable sugar production in Europe. It remains a cause célèbre for those arguing that membership of the EU has harmed the Latvian economy.



Populist politicians generally adopted a far more aggressive and belligerent tone than their mainstream counterparts. In the Delfi TV interview with LPV leaders, the female moderator repeatedly asked the male politicians to stop shouting and be less aggressive in their speaking style. This approach can be seen as part of the populist performance in Latvia – populists echo ‘the people’s’ anger at the state of politics and the economy, frequently arguing that the mainstream media are in cahoots with the governing parties and are thus institutionally opposed to opposition (populist) parties.

## The demand side

The final election results came with few surprises. As surveys had predicted, the mainstream parties won the largest share of votes, and of the populist forces, only LPV won a single seat in the EP (and this was won by a former Latvian prime minister, Vilis Krištopāns, continuing the Latvian trend of electing experienced, proven former political office-holders in European elections) (see Table 1).

Table 1. Results of the 2024 European Parliament election in Latvia<sup>6</sup>

Party (European Parliament group)	Number of seats in EP	Share of vote	Name of elected MEPs
<b>New Unity, JV (European People’s Party, EPP)</b>	2	25.1%	Valdis Dombrovskis Sandra Kalniete
<b>National Alliance (European Conservatives and Reformists, ECR)</b>	2	22.1%	Roberts Zīle Rihards Kols
<b>Latvia’s Development, LA (Renew Europe)</b>	1	9.4%	Ivars Ījabs
<b>United List, AS (European Conservatives and Reformists, ECR)</b>	1	8.2%	Reinis Pozņaks
<b>Progressives, PRO (The Greens / European Free Alliance)</b>	1	7.5%	Mārtiņš Staķis
<b>Harmony Social Democracy, SSD (Socialists and Democrats, S&amp;D)</b>	1	7.1%	Nils Ušakovs
<b>Latvia First, LPV (Patriots For Europe, PfiE)</b>	1	6.2%	Vilis Krištopāns

Source: Central Election Commission of Latvia (2024c).

However, after being elected to the European Parliament, LPV’s Vilis Krištopāns found himself without a political home. He was blocked from joining the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group by the National Alliance’s Roberts Zīle (a vice president of the European Parliament and senior figure in the ECR), who



stated that LPV's pro-peace rhetoric on the Russia–Ukraine War made it an unsuitable partner for ECR. Krištopāns eventually joined the new Patriots for Europe (Pfe) group.

The populist parties' weak performance in the election was unsurprising. Their position on the Russia–Ukraine War was out of kilter with most ethnic Latvians (who make up three-quarters of the electorate) – a 2023 poll found that 78% of respondents who speak Latvian in their family sympathized with Ukraine, while only 27% of those that speak Russian in their family did so (Krumm, Šukevičs & Zariņš, 2023: 10). A 2024 report found that 58% of respondents who speak Latvian in their family believed that membership of the EU was an advantage in the fulfilment of their dreams, while only 24% of those who speak Russian in their family did so (Ločmele, Zatlers & Krumm, 2024). The core populist 'peace' rhetoric and criticism of the EU only had traction with a minority of the population and these votes went to the candidate with the most experienced political CV.

## Future perspective

Latvia will now have a major politician in the Pfe group, the largest far-right political group in the European Parliament. As a result, LPV will further integrate into the Pfe's network of far-right parties and the party is likely to emerge as the first vocal Euroskeptic force in contemporary Latvia. After all, in a press conference held after returning from Brussels, Krištopāns stated that 'having got know the European Parliament, the situation is even worse than I thought. The European Parliament has been taken over by left-wingers, pride supporters, climate fanatics and [illegal migrant] Welcomists!' (LPV, 2024).

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6. The share of the vote for the other populist parties reviewed in this report was below the 5% electoral threshold: SV 2.6%, AJ 2.1%, S! 2%, CP 1.7%, TZV 0.6%, TVS 0.3%.



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The image features the Lithuanian flag as a background, with its characteristic yellow, green, and red horizontal stripes. Overlaid on the flag are several semi-transparent, geometric shapes in various shades of yellow, green, and red, creating a modern, abstract design. In the top-left corner, the word "LITHUANIA" is written vertically in white, uppercase letters. To the right of the text, there are three thin vertical lines: a blue one on the left, a yellow one in the middle, and a red one on the right.

LITHUANIA



# Lithuanian Populist Far-right (In) security Discourse During the European Parliament Elections in the face of Russia's War Against Ukraine

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## Abstract

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia has disrupted the previously perceived stability in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and exacerbated the prevailing sense of insecurity. The evolving circumstances are reshaping the political terrain and presenting avenues to mobilize support for the populist far right. However, to date, the far-right populist parties in Lithuania have not been successful in either national or European Parliament (EP) elections, as they have failed to surpass the required thresholds. However, the most recent European Parliament elections were an exception, with the election of a long-standing far-right politician in Lithuania as an MEP. This study delves into an analysis of the discourse employed by Lithuanian far-right populists throughout the 2024 EP election campaign, with a specific focus on the narratives pertaining to (in) security that they propagated. The investigation seeks to ascertain whether the far right capitalized on the situation to fuel discussions on crisis with the aim of attracting support and identifying the strategies utilized in constructing the narratives surrounding (in)security.

**Keywords:** *populist far right, European Parliament election, insecurity, immigrants, European Green Deal, traditional values*

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## Introduction

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022 disrupted the sense of stability in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), exacerbating existing widespread insecurity and evoking memories of Soviet repression. Although the unyielding support of the Lithuanian political elite and society for Ukraine has cultivated a rally around the flag effect, the prolonged conflict has underscored the critical importance of defence solutions. These conditions create a conducive environment for the far right to mobilize support. Although far-right populists thus far have been unable to surpass the 5% threshold required to secure seats in the national legislature, shifting circumstances provide the far right with opportunities to advocate for increased security measures and criticize the political establishment for its perceived inaction. The election of far-right politician Petras Gražulis to the European Parliament (EP) in 2024 signifies a change in the reception of contentious political discourse. The central question of this chapter concerns whether the far right is leveraging these conditions to acquire backing and the methodologies utilized to mould narratives of (in)security.

In this chapter, I define the populist far right as political agents who adhere to the procedural norms of democracy and are situated at the extreme right end of the left–right ideological spectrum. Their rhetoric is distinguished by populism and nativism, where the nation is viewed as a homogeneous entity that needs to be defended from both a corrupt political elite and perceived external threats (Wodak, 2019). The populist far right portrays the political elite as corrupt, acting against the populace's interests and advancing the agenda of the European Union (Golder, 2016; Buštíková & Kitschelt, 2009; Wodak, 2019). Finally, they place a strong emphasis on traditional family values and a nostalgic yearning for an idealized past (Wodak, 2019).

This article analyses the discourse of three populist far-right political organizations. The National Alliance (Nacionalinis susivienijimas, NS) failed to secure any parliamentary seats in the 2020 elections but gained 3 out of 51 seats on the Vilnius City Council in 2023. The People and Justice Union (Tautos ir teisingumo sąjunga, TTS) held one parliamentary seat in a single-mandate constituency until late 2023. The third party, the Christian Union (Krikščionių sąjunga, KS), aligned with the Lithuanian Family Movement (Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis, LŠS) in the 2024 EP election. LŠS, known for organizing the 'Great March in Defence of the Family' and other anti-government protests, won five seats across various municipal councils in spring 2023 on the ballots of different political parties. The analysis

draws on electoral manifestos, official election debates and communications via official Facebook pages and websites during the EP election campaign.

In this chapter, I present the results of the EP elections in Lithuania and then examine the rhetoric employed by Lithuanian far-right populists during the election campaign, focusing particularly on articulated narratives of (in)security. The analysis looks at whether the campaign focused more on leveraging the crisis – a tactic often used by the Lithuanian far right – or if it instead tried to offer ideas for creating security in a volatile situation.

## European Parliament election campaign and results

The 2024 EP elections in June marked the third time Lithuanian voters had been to the polls within six weeks, leading to an intertwining of election debates across different institutions. The preceding presidential election had dominated both public and political agendas, with some candidates leveraging it to boost their popularity ahead of the EP elections. Additionally, national parliamentary elections scheduled for autumn compelled many candidates to focus their campaigns on domestic issues. As a result, EP election debates were heavily dominated by national concerns, such as social benefits and employment, rather than EU-specific policies. The compressed electoral timeline and emphasis on national issues may have contributed to voter fatigue, as evidenced by the low turnout for the EP elections (28.94%), which was significantly lower than in previous years when it coincided with the presidential runoff (53.48% in 2019 and 47.35% in 2014).

The 2024 EP elections in Lithuania saw voters lean towards mainstream candidates and a significant degree of continuity, with five of the country's eleven elected MEPs retaining their seats from the previous term. Moreover, two of the new MEPs had previously served as European Commissioners, further reinforcing the presence of experienced EU-level politicians on the Lithuanian slate. The most successful parties were the Homeland Union–Lithuanian Christian Democrats, who won three seats and 20.92% of the vote. The Social Democratic Party of Lithuania came second with two seats and 17.63% of the vote. The following political parties shared the remaining six seats, taking one each: Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union (8.95%), Freedom Party (7.94%), the Union of Democrats 'For Lithuania' (5.84%), Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania–Christian Families Alliance (5.67%),



the People and Justice Union, TTS (5.34%), Liberals' Movement (5.31%).

The notable exception to the support for the mainstream was electing Petras Gražulis, a leader of TTS, with 5.45 % of votes. TTS is itself an amalgam of several outfits, including the Centrists–Nationalists, Gražulis' political movement 'For Lithuania, Men!' (Už Lietuvą, vyrai!), and the Union of Lithuanian Nationalists and Republicans. Lacking a cohesive ideological core, TTS has been predominantly associated with the persona of its leader, Gražulis, since 2021. Gražulis, a figure of notable controversy, has garnered international attention, including recognition on Politico's list of the most eccentric MEPs (Wax & Cokelaere, 2024). His political profile is characterized by determined opposition to the LGBTQ+ community, particularly evident in his contentious engagement with 'Pride' events. The controversy surrounding Gražulis extends beyond rhetoric into legal domains. He is currently facing criminal prosecution for alleged defamation of LGBTQ+ individuals (Steniulienė et al., 2024), which led to him being denied joining and questioning by the EP party of his choice – the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group. Eventually, he joined the Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN) group.

Gražulis, who served as a member of the Seimas (Lithuania's parliament) from 1996 to 2023, has consistently secured his position through single-mandate constituency victories. His political career reached a critical juncture in the winter of 2023 when he was impeached by the Seimas. The impeachment process, triggered by his unauthorized voting on behalf of another MP, culminated in a ruling by the Constitutional Court that the politician had broken his oath of office and violated the constitution (Gaučaitė-Znutienė et al., 2023). During election debates, Gražulis strategically reframed this decision as political persecution to express his indignation and to present himself as a victim of censorship and political repression. The election outcomes indicate that his party achieved significant success in the regions outside the major cities of Lithuania. A decline in voter turnout, the dissolution of the right-wing populist party Order and Justice (Andrukaitytė, 2020), and the absence of other ideologically similar political leaders (such as Remigijus Žemaitaitis, another controversial right-wing politician) in the EP elections all contributed to the backing received by this politician.

In general, the populist far-right parties in Lithuania experienced limited electoral success. Only one such party surpassed the 5% threshold necessary for representation. Despite conducting an intensive campaign, the National Alliance expressed disappointment with its performance, garnering only 3.79% of the vote.

In a post-election press conference, one of the party's leaders, Vytautas Sinica, posited that their programmatic provisions and discourse might have been too complex for the electorate, suggesting a potential reconsidering of their campaign strategy ahead of the national elections. The Christian Union's even less favourable outcome, securing only 1.37% of the votes, further underscores the challenges far-right parties face in Lithuania.

## Prioritizing culture wars over the war in Ukraine: Fighting the usual suspects

Despite the prevalent focus in Lithuanian public discourse on the war against Ukraine (and the Russian threat) and broader defence and security matters, the far-right narrative gives precedence to Lithuania's internal security. All scrutinized political parties emphasize the nation's sovereignty over EU federalism and express a dedication to shielding the nation from the 'dictates of EU bureaucrats' and the so-called ideologies promoted by the EU, such as genderism and multiculturalism. Safeguarding the nation and traditional family values serves as the foundation and primary perspective through which all other matters are examined.

For example, the Christian Union asserts that Lithuania encounters a dual threat: 'Our country and the entirety of European civilization face the threat of war, while internally Lithuania is undermined by an ideology that is hostile to the natural family, the Lithuanian language, culture and traditions, Christian values and scientific truths' (Central Electoral Commission, 2024). Nevertheless, every other section of the manifesto highlights the importance of safeguarding family and traditional values. Similarly, the National Alliance's campaign material prominently features the threat of war but as a backdrop. The primary focus of the National Alliance's propositions is the defence of traditional European cultural values against EU bureaucrats and their supposed intentional effort to push Europe toward a multicultural identity to undermine the authority of nation-states.

These so-called ideological dangers are linked to the Istanbul Convention, an international agreement to prevent and combat violence against women, which is yet to be ratified in Lithuania and is vehemently opposed by far-right political groups. The Istanbul Convention is labelled as the ideology of genderism – a foe deemed worthy of resistance by A. Rusteika (Jursevičius, 2024) or a social engineering venture rooted in Marxist ideology, aiming to dismantle the family



structure in Europe by Radžvilas (Jursevičius, 2024).

Another identified adversary is the LGBTQ+ community. The EP elections coincided with Vilnius Pride – a fact not overlooked by the National Alliance. The party noted that the demands from the LGBT community are endless, starting from recognition and parades to gender transition rights, marriage, and adoption (Sinica, 2024).

The spectre of communism is continuously brought up by the far right to evoke cultural trauma from the Soviet era. The character and magnitude of this threat were most eloquently articulated by the elected MEP:

Europe today is simply a poison that brings genderism, drugs and everything else that destroys the idea of the founding fathers, whether Schuman or Adenauer, who created this Europe. Now, they are destroying all values, Christian values, by introducing Leftism, same-sex marriage and all these perversions. I want to tell you that we are going backwards; in fact, Europe has returned to the ideas of Russia or even Lenin.... If these values return, the family will be destroyed; with what they are doing, there will be no more Europe [in the future]. (Pumprickaitė, 2024)

In addition to these internal threats emanating from the EU, migration is another usual suspect in the list of far-right threats. The image of migrant flows, so characteristic to the discourse of the EU's far-right politicians, is also articulated in Lithuania, with a particular focus on Russian-speaking migrants. The unprecedented influx of immigrants in 2022, primarily driven by the reception of Ukrainian refugees, and the subsequent 15% increase in the foreign population in 2023 have catalysed the securitization of discourse.

The far right's strategic focus on Russian-speaking migrants from Belarus and Central Asia suggests selective targeting of specific groups of immigrants. Migrants, both those trying to cross the border illegally and those who have obtained visas to work in Lithuania (mainly from Central Asian countries and Belarus), are portrayed as a homogenous group and as 'invaders', disloyal to the Lithuanian government and a threat to Lithuanian identity. Meanwhile, refugees from Ukraine are rarely mentioned by the far right. In a society that still actively supports Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees – some 89% of Lithuanians agree that Ukrainian refugees fleeing the war should be accepted (European Commission, 2024) – it is difficult to portray



them as malicious intruders. Although the governing political parties have taken stringent measures to restrict migration across the Belarus–Lithuania border, the far right has also criticized the government for being insufficiently restrictive and ‘kept the borders open until the European Commissioner for Migration herself came to Lithuania and authorised the turnarounds’ (Radžvilas & Sinica, 2024).

The European Green Deal is a new usual suspect emerging in the rhetoric of the Lithuanian far right. The Green Deal and renewable energy policies are framed as ‘extremist’ and examples of ideological ‘fanatism’ emanating from Brussels aimed at burdening ordinary citizens with regulations and fines (Radžvilas, 2024a). While nominally supporting environmental protection, they advocate for a ‘rational’ approach (Central Electoral Commission, 2024: 21) that does not ‘ruin the European economy’ (Central Electoral Commission, 2024: 18).

This stance allows the far right to position themselves as pragmatic defenders of national economic interests against perceived EU overreach. First, the EU environmental policies are portrayed as a threat to Lithuanian farmers, who are purportedly already disadvantaged by lower EU subsidies than their counterparts in the West. Secondly, it is argued that environmental restrictions impose undue burdens on businesses, potentially compromising competitiveness (Tapinienė, 2024). The far right’s unexpected positioning as defenders of both business and agricultural interests during the EP election campaign represents a strategic adaptation of their rhetoric.

## Security issues: bridging defence and social conservatism

Security and defence issues, already prominent in the CEE region, have come to dominate Lithuania’s public discourse, not least because of the election of the president of Lithuania in the spring, the official who is the commander-in-chief of the Lithuanian armed forces. Security and defence issues dominated the election debates and are also at the forefront of public opinion: a recent Eurobarometer survey shows that 60 % of Lithuanians (in contrast to 37 % of EU citizens) argue that the EU should focus more on defence and security issues to reinforce its position globally (European Parliament, 2024). In response to perceived security challenges, the Lithuanian government has implemented a series of proactive measures, including augmenting defence expenditure, planning strategic military acquisitions and initiating reforms to the conscription system.



Within this heightened security context, far-right political organizations find themselves compelled to engage with international security issues. Their security discourse is characterized by a multifaceted narrative that interweaves the concepts of national defence, national identity and traditional family values. This rhetorical strategy positions these parties as unique defenders of both conservative societal norms and robust national security.

Gražulis, the People and Justice Union leader, presented a forceful critique of the West. He asserted that the root cause of conflicts, including the current war, is the accommodating stance of US President Biden and the Western powers more broadly (Tapinienė, 2024). Furthermore, he censured the Lithuanian government, alleging that it is stoking tensions and provoking Putin. Gražulis' proposed remedy for the prevailing insecurity is the election of Donald Trump as the president of the United States. He revealed that his outfit had opened an electoral campaign office in Lithuania supporting Trump, emphasizing the former US president's purported dedication to peace and traditional values: 'We support Trump's views on the traditional family and traditional values. We trust Trump's promise to end the war in Ukraine within 24 hours, at the expense of Russia' (ALFA.LT, 2024).

Within the discourse of the National Alliance, a distinct sentiment of distrust towards international partners in the West is evident. Vytautas Radžvilas, the National Alliance leader, portrays Lithuania as positioned within the ambiguous sphere situated between the two competing geopolitical forces of Russia and the West. While advocating for the development of the defence industry at the national level and financial support at the EU level in the party manifesto, Radžvilas simultaneously contends that in the event of a conflict, no NATO or European allies would intervene to protect Lithuania (Radžvilas, 2024b). Specifically, he underscored a sense of mistrust towards the United States in light of the shift in US strategic focus toward the Pacific Ocean region (Beniušis et al., 2024). Conversely, the Western European allies are depicted as engaging in friendly interactions with Russia. Even the deployment of a German army brigade to Lithuania, although welcomed, does not instil complete confidence, and the primary focus remains on bolstering Lithuania's national defence capabilities (Ibid.). The proposed solution is two-fold. Firstly, to enhance sovereignty and national security for self-defence, Lithuania must strive for independence from Brussels (Radžvilas, 2024b). Secondly, Lithuania should rally a coalition comprising Central Eastern European and Scandinavian nations to advocate for reforms within EU policy (Beniušis et al., 2024).

All analysed political parties endorse the European integration of Ukraine. It appears inevitable in a country where, as of May 2024, 77% of Lithuanians supported granting Ukraine candidate status (European Commission, 2024). However, even this pro-European stance is exploited by the far right to advance their political agenda. Gražulis and the Christian Union advocate for Ukraine's accession, citing its potential to combat 'genderism' and uphold Christian principles. Nevertheless, there are lingering reservations. Aurelijus Rusteika, one of the leaders of the Lithuanian Family Movement, highlights concerns that the European project entails a loss of national sovereignty, prompting questions about Ukraine's willingness to relinquish its autonomy to Brussels (Jursevičius, 2024). Additionally, the National Alliance posits that the integration decision will be a pivotal choice between the major geopolitical players, namely the West and Russia (Jursevičius, 2024). Even in cases where unequivocal public backing exists, the far right manages to cultivate an environment characterized by scepticism and lack of clarity.

## Conclusion

The European Parliament election in 2024 marked a significant milestone as the populist far right in Lithuania managed to surpass the 5% electoral threshold for the first time. Factors such as support from regions outside major cities, low voter turnout, the disbandment of the right-wing populist party Order and Justice, and the absence of similar ideological leaders in the EP elections all contributed to the rise of politician Petras Gražulis. Nevertheless, it is crucial to note that current circumstances have seen political parties engaging in debates that reinforce narratives of insecurity in society.

The party led by Petras Gražulis, along with other political entities under scrutiny, navigate their rhetoric by considering prevailing societal attitudes towards Ukraine and Ukrainians while also fuelling discontent towards familiar targets such as the Istanbul Convention and the LGBTQ+ community. However, notwithstanding the difficult security situation prevailing in the region, the primary focus of policymakers has centred on the cultural wars within the state. This year, the influx of migrants originating from Belarus and Central Asia, as well as the implications of the European Green Deal on farmers and businesses in Lithuania, have been underscored as potential threats to the nation. Although the analysed political parties emphasize their commitment to the security and defence of Lithuania, their discourse primarily reflects a deep-seated scepticism towards international partners,



emphasizing the pivotal role of upholding Lithuania's sovereignty and implementing national defence strategies as the key to ensuring security both at the global level and domestically. However, the European elections in June are not the end of the story; the national parliamentary elections in autumn will be another opportunity for far-right populist parties in Lithuania to repeat established and articulate new (in)security narratives.

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The image features the national flag of Luxembourg, which consists of three horizontal stripes of red, white, and light blue. The flag is set against a background of abstract, overlapping geometric shapes in the same color palette. A prominent dark red diagonal band runs from the top left towards the center. A white and light blue geometric shape, resembling a stylized 'L' or a large letter, is positioned in the center. The word 'LUXEMBOURG' is written vertically in white, uppercase letters on the left side of the image, positioned over the red stripe of the flag. The overall design is modern and dynamic, with sharp lines and a sense of movement.

**LUXEMBOURG**

# Right-wing Populism in Luxembourg During the 2024 EP Election

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## Abstract

Right-wing populism in Luxembourg is largely confined to the Alternative Democratic Reform Party (Alternativ Demokratesch Reformpartei, ADR). The name is, however, a bit of a misnomer. While ideologically, the ADR maintains national-conservative positions consistent with other European right-wing populist parties, its views are not as extreme. The party retains relatively constant support, consistently gaining around 10% of the vote in national elections; in the 2023 election for the Chamber of Deputies, it gained 9.3%, while in the 2019 European Parliament election, the party gained 10%, just short of enough to obtain a seat. Given the rise in support for right-wing populist parties in other European countries (e.g., the AfD in Germany or the National Rally in France), the ADR was optimistic about its chances of gaining its first-ever seat in the European Parliament, which would require about 12% of the vote total. This contribution will investigate the results of the European Parliament election in Luxembourg, focusing on the ADR. It will discuss any ideological shifts in the party as well as its positioning on a host of issues where one finds a prominent voice for right-wing populist parties in Europe, including NATO, the war in Ukraine, migration, COVID-19 or the functioning of the European Union. The entry will also address the results of the election to determine how strong support for right-wing populism in Luxembourg is. Other relevant aspects of the election (e.g., campaign events, media coverage) will be discussed if they featured prominently in the campaign.

***Keywords:** ADR; Luxembourgish; European integration; transnational migration; Luxembourg Compromise*

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## Background

Luxembourg is not a country known for right-wing populism. With a population of 672,000, roughly half of whom hold foreign nationality (STATEC, 2020), it is a small and internationally integrated country that benefits greatly from the trends of globalization that many right-wing populists denounce; the country is highly integrated politically in the European Union, its economy is heavily dependent on international financial and economic integration, and its economy similarly is heavily dependent on an international and transnational worker base, many of whom travel daily to Luxembourg from neighbouring countries (Carls, 2023; de Jonge, 2021; Fetzer, 2011). Luxembourg does, nevertheless, have a party that maintains a right-wing populist profile and that has had electoral success, the Alternative Democratic Reform Party (Alternativ Demokratesch Reformspartei, ADR). The party formed in 1987 as the Aktiounskomitee 5/6 Pensioun fir jiddferen (Action Committee 5/6ths–Pensions for Everyone) to campaign on the single issue of pension reform and in 1992, changed its name to Aktiounskomitee fir Demokratie a Rentegerechtegheet (Action Committee for Democracy and Pension Justice). In 1999 the party received its greatest success to date in the national general election with 11.3% of the vote, although pension reforms in 1998 and 2002 made the single issue of pension reform less pressing (Schulze, 2006). The ADR then evolved into a catch-all party, adopting its current name in 2006. In 2015 it gained prominence in the campaign surrounding a referendum to amend the constitution to allow, among other things, non-Luxembourgish residents to vote in general elections for the Chamber of Deputies, Luxembourg's national legislative body. The election result showed that between 70% and 80% of the population rejected the proposed constitutional modifications. The ADR was notably the only elected party to oppose the proposed reforms (Carls, 2023). In the 2019 European Parliament (EP) election, the party gained 10%, just short of enough to obtain a seat, while in the most recent general election in 2023, the party received 9.27% of the vote and gained 5 seats in the 60-seat Chamber of Deputies.

Ideologically the party maintains a national–conservative profile with flavours of classical liberalism that seeks a broad appeal, including to the working class. In the 2023 general election, for example, the party criticized 'gender ideology' or the push for transgender recognition but also supported legalizing prostitution. The party generally maintains a distrust of big government, whether economically or in terms of individual freedom, consumer rights or bodily autonomy, as was the case during the COVID-19 pandemic (ADR, 2023), but also supports government



protection of special working privileges for Luxembourgers, which sees well-paid government jobs going only to those with a high proficiency of Luxembourgish, a position with broad appeal among the electorate (Carls, 2023).

There is no consensus as to whether the ADR is a right-wing populist party, with some saying yes (Blau, 2005; Carls, 2023; Zulianello, 2020) (although these authors generally note that the variety of populism exhibited by the ADR is mild or atypical in comparison with other European cases) and some saying no (Camus, 2017; Poirier, 2012). Such confusion stems from the fact that, due to Luxembourg's specific socioeconomic situation, a right-wing populist party in the style of the National Rally or the Freedom Party of Austria is likely electorally impossible, leading the ADR to adopt comparatively softer stances on important issues. The ADR is by no means in favour of an exit from the EU, for example, and while it is in many respects critical of both the EU and multiculturalism, such critiques are often modulated by words of praise for the positive benefits the EU and immigration have brought to Luxembourg (Carls, 2023; de Jonge, 2021).

Nevertheless, it shares many of the same positions and preoccupations as other right-wing populist parties in Europe (including migration, Covid policies, free speech, retaining national sovereignty within an EU institutional framework, etc.) and is a member of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group in the EP, which includes the well-known Law and Justice Party (PiS) from Poland, the Brothers of Italy (led by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni), and the Sweden Democrats (Carls, 2023; Lamour & Carls 2022). These facts, coupled with the lack of a suitable alternative, suggest that any exploration of right-wing populism in Luxembourg must focus on the ADR.

Heading into the 2024 EP election, the ADR's lead candidate was Fernand Kartheiser, a former military officer and diplomat and a member of the Luxembourgish Chamber of Deputies for the ADR since 2009. The party prioritized several issues: the functioning of EU institutions, maintaining the 1966 Luxembourg Compromise or the veto power of countries regarding decisions deemed of vital national interest, migration policies, the preservation of the combustion engine or the opposition to green politics more generally, and concerning the war in Ukraine, a politics of peace in Europe.



## ADR positioning during the election: The supply side

Following a minimalist definition according to which populism is ‘an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people’ (Mudde, 2017: 29), the ADR’s framing of issues during the 2024 election was broadly populist. Right-wing populism contains a further nationalist dimension (de Cleen, 2017; Mudde, 2007; Rydgren, 2007; 2017; Taguieff, 2015), also present in the ADR’s electoral framing. This additional element leads to a set of exclusions on the vertical axis (people–elite) and the horizontal axis (people–outsiders) that is characteristic of right-wing populist discourse and was visible in the ADR’s advocacy for a ‘Europe of sovereign nations’ (ADR, 2024a: 1).

Much of the ADR’s policy positions and profile as a right-wing populist party in the EP election can be summed up in a passage from their EU electoral program:

The ADR must note with regret that the EU has also fundamentally changed politically in recent years. Obvious violations of the rule of law in the Covid Crisis, the war in Ukraine with sanctions against Russia that drive up energy prices and destroy European competitiveness, the high inflation that is also linked to the monetary policy of the ECB, a militant and harmful green policy in the field of energy and industry, a still massive and unbridled illegal immigration in Europe, accusations of corruption, including against the President of the European Commission, a diffuse and contradictory accession policy, limitations of freedom of expression and institutional threats not only from the EU institutions but also from increased German and French hegemonic efforts are only a few of the many challenges we face. These and many other problems have progressively made it more and more difficult for the European Union to present a facade of unity to the outside world. The European institutions have not caught up with how far they have already moved away from the people. (ADR, 2024a: 17)

This passage encapsulates the vertical and horizontal exclusions typified by right-wing populism and remains consistent with the ADR’s positions in past years. Luxembourgers and other European nations are represented by the idea of the ‘people’.



They are opposed vertically by a left-wing dominated and increasingly autocratic EU and horizontally by ‘unbridled illegal immigration’ from the third world.

The vertical exclusions pitting the ‘people’ against elites was the most salient aspect of the campaign positioning and was visible on the following issues, which the ADR emphasized during its campaign. The first is federalism. The ADR fundamentally opposed efforts at EU federalism or a strongly centralized federal EU state that takes competencies away from the member states. The party notably criticized ‘Brussels bureaucrats’ who take power away from ‘the people’ in their nation-states (ADR, 2024a: 1). In line with its opposition to a federal state and support for national sovereignty, the ADR strongly supported the unanimity principle or the veto power of countries in the European Council regarding decisions deemed of vital national interest. Of note is the importance of this principle as it concerns Luxembourg’s financial and taxation systems.

The ADR also condemned Brussels’ attempts to isolate member countries with which it has important conflicts. Such conflicts surround refugee and migration policies, family policies and changes in national legal procedures. They have often involved members of the Visegrad Group, most notably Poland and Hungary. The ADR framed such conflicts as a result of a clash of wills – namely, that of ‘the people’, which democratically elects politicians to enact specific policies, and that of the ‘unelected’ EU (ADR, 2024a: 7).

The ADR strongly supported the principle of free speech and saw it under threat from left-wing activists and EU regulation. It spoke specifically of the Digital Services Act, an EU regulation designed to promote transparency of online services. While such efforts aimed to fight disinformation and defend democracy, the ADR argued that such measures actually demonstrated that the EU was increasingly less tolerant of voters who have the ‘wrong’ opinions or vote for the ‘wrong’ politicians (ADR, 2024a: 7).

The ADR also equated the EU with ‘experts’ who push a radical green–left ideology onto member states in an undemocratic way. The ADR saw such policies as a way to grant ever-greater competencies to the EU, arguing that decisions around environmental regulation should be left to national states (ADR, 2024a: 9). EU policies in this area, the party argued, have led to economic hardship and undermined innovation. The party made a particular point of the EU’s decision to ban the sale of internal combustion engines by 2035, a decision it called ‘extremist’ (ADR, 2024a: 21).



While the ADR strongly condemned the Russian attack on Ukraine (ADR, 2022), the party took a position of peace concerning the war in Ukraine. Recognizing the complexity of the situation and the relevance of Ukraine geopolitically, the party called on the EU not to intensify a conflict that would only serve to destroy Ukraine. It also criticized Brussels for not abiding by the Minsk Accords and reproached the EU for utilizing the conflict to push a federalist agenda, in this case concerning European defence (ADR, 2024a: 4). The party was also somewhat sceptical of Ukraine's ability to join the EU, noting that it fulfilled none of the Copenhagen criteria and should not be accepted without an exhaustive accession process (ADR, 2024a: 36).

The ADR was critical of continued, uncontrolled migration to Europe from largely third-world or war-torn countries. In this respect, the EU has been leading a failed migration policy since 2015, which has led to a significant loss of trust in the EU and substantial illegal immigration, including economic migrants masquerading as refugees. The ADR called for a humane policy that granted asylum but reduced migratory flows and prevented illegal immigration.

Another point that the ADR made during the campaign was to advocate for the recognition of Luxembourgish as an official EU language. Such recognition was important as it would recognize Luxembourg as a unique country with its own history and culture. As such, the ADR appealed to Luxembourgish national pride.

Despite their criticisms of the EU, the ADR nuanced its positions on many points. The ADR made it clear that it supported the EU. It noted the great advances the EU had given to Europe in terms of peace and prosperity in post-war Europe (ADR, 2024a: 3). The party was thus concerned that so many people had lost their trust in the project and stated that their goal was 'to stabilize Europe in these times and rebuild it at the same time so that the idea of a European Union remains attractive for the next generations in as many countries as possible' (ADR, 2024a: 2). On these points, the ADR made a clear distinction between itself and other right-wing populist parties. As Alexandra Schoos, president of the ADR at the time of the EU election, stated in an interview:

The intention of the ADR is certainly not to destroy the European project from within. As Luxembourg, we need Europe and a European Union. The ADR is therefore certainly not on the same line as defended by certain parties which are opposed to the EU. (Schoos, 2024)

The ADR similarly struck a positive tone on the issue of migration (or at least legal migration within EU borders, of which there is a great deal in Luxembourg): ‘The ADR is expressly of the opinion that the legal migration of persons in the internal market can bring many advantages and should continue to be encouraged’ (ADR, 2024a, pp. 3–4). These nuances were also visible in the ADR’s campaign posters, which also served as social media posts. The image in Figure 1 from the party’s Facebook page states, ‘Don’t ban the combustion engine’ Below the image is the ADR’s EU campaign slogan: *Fir e staarkt Lëtzebuerg an Europa* (‘For a strong Luxembourg in Europe’). This slogan clearly indicated that the ADR saw Luxembourg’s destiny as closely tied to that of the EU.

Figure 1. ADR Facebook Post for the 2024 EU Parliament Election.



Source: ADR (2024b)

These nuanced positions are consistent with the brand of right-wing populism the ADR embodies, which offers moderate critiques of the EU, all while distancing itself from the more radical positions taken by other European right-wing populist parties (Carls, 2023).

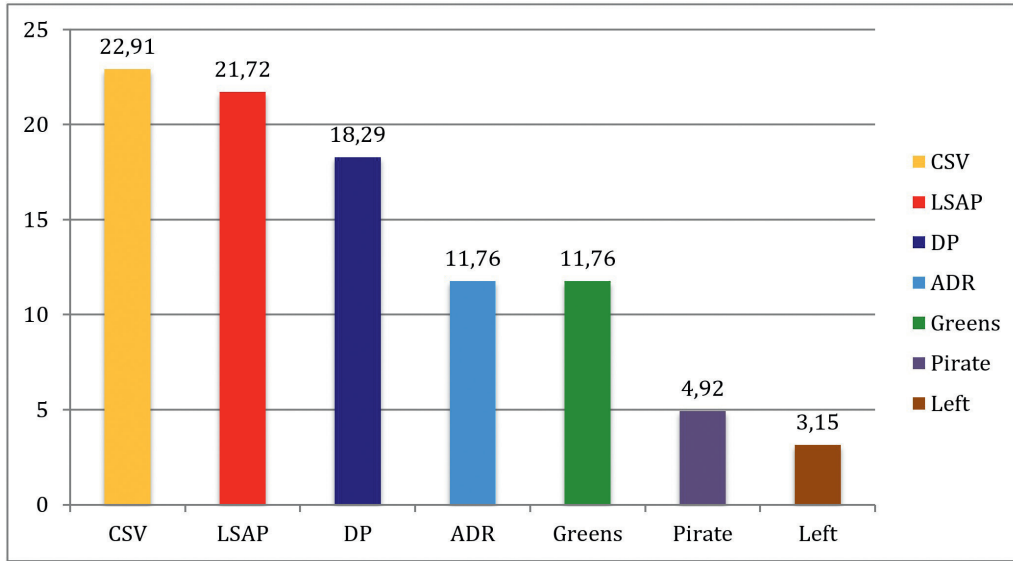


The ADR performed its message in a variety of ways. Party leaders such as Fernand Kartheiser, Fred Keup, and Alexandra Schoos made media appearances for interviews or debates with other candidates in national print newspapers, on national radio stations such as Radio Television Luxembourg (RTL) or Radio 100.7, and on TV, for example, on RTL's *Kloertext* or *Table Ronde* programs. The party was also active on social media, posting content on Facebook, X, Instagram and TikTok. ADR candidates and party representatives were also present at stands at local street markets and events throughout the country in the weeks and months leading up to the election.

## Election results: The demand side

The election results can be found in Figure 2. The Christian Social People's Party (CSV), a member of the European People's Party (EPP) group, came in first with 22.91% of the vote and obtained two EP seats. The ADR tied with the Greens at 11.76%, an improvement of 1.72 percentage points over their showing in 2019 and also higher than their performance in the 2023 general election, allowing them to obtain their first-ever EP seat, which was filled by Fernand Kartheiser. All remaining elected parties received one seat in the EP. All the main issues the ADR campaigned on likely contributed to their success, with none standing out. Figure 3 shows the trends in the ADR's electoral support since its founding and shows that this support has grown only marginally since 1989. While there was talk of a *Rechtsruck* or strong shift to the right in many European countries, it would be wrong to claim this was the case in Luxembourg. Support for the ADR has remained relatively steady between 8–10% over the decades, and while the 2024 EP election result was the party's highest showing yet, the party remains a relevant but junior player in Luxembourgish politics. Nevertheless, the result allowed the ADR, for the first time, to be represented at all levels of government in Luxembourg and marked a high point in the party's history.

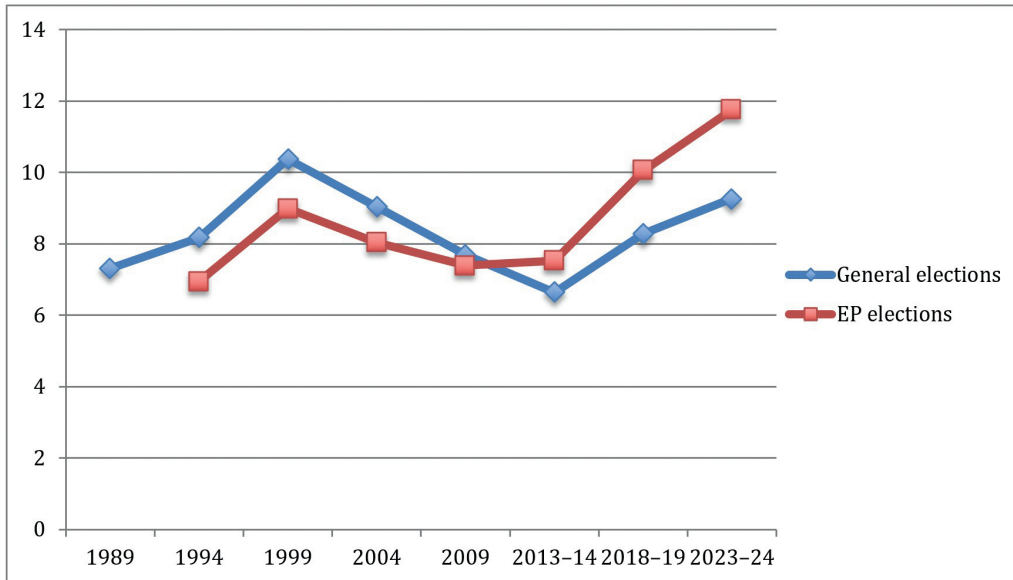
Figure 2. Results of the 2024 EU elections in Luxembourg (% vote share by party)



Source: Government of Luxembourg

Abbreviation	Party name	European Party Affiliation
CSV	Christian Social People's Party	European People's Party
LSAP	Luxembourg Socialist Workers' Party	Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats
DP	Democratic Party	Renew Europe
ADR	Alternative Democratic Party	European Conservatives and Reformists
Greens	The Greens	Greens/European Free Alliance
Pirate	Pirate Party Luxembourg	European Pirate Party
Left	The Left	The Left in the European Parliament - GUE/NGL

Figure 3. Trends in ADR support in general and EP elections in Luxembourg (% vote share, 1989-2024)



Source: Government of Luxembourg



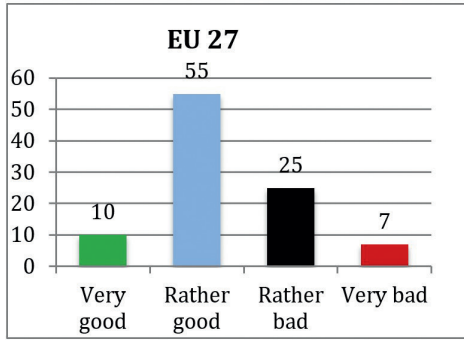


The media landscape of Luxembourg is quite distinctive. Print publications receive generous state subsidies to preserve media plurality and many such publications have a direct link to established political parties. The largest and oldest newspaper, the *Luxemburger Wort*, has connections to the CSV, while the second largest, the *Tageblatt*, has connections to the Luxembourg Socialist Workers' Party (LSAP). The country is also very small, leading to a high degree of familiarity between journalists and political actors. As a result, the media landscape generally represents the moderate positions of the country's political elites (de Jonge, 2021, pp. 159–163). That said, the print media reported on the election results in a mostly neutral way, simply noting the results and that it was a historic night for the ADR. Such was the case with the article in the *Luxemburger Wort*, which also included quotes from many ADR politicians (Javel, 2024). One exception came from the *Tageblatt*, which noted in their coverage that the ADR was among the ranks of 'right-wing populists' (*Rechtspopulisten*). The article also noted that the ADR would caucus with the ECR, which was led by the 'post-fascist' Giorgia Meloni and would likely soon include Hungary's Fidesz party, whose leader Viktor Orbán was an 'outspoken friend' of Vladimir Putin (Kemp, 2024). Apart from such exceptions, print media reporting on the ADR leading up to the election was also mostly neutral.

The situation was similar regarding radio and television leading up to the election, with coverage mostly neutral and the ADR being invited, as with all other parties, to debates, interviews and other events hosted by, for example, RTL, the country's main radio and television station. Unlike in other countries where there is a *Brandmauer* (firewall) or *cordon sanitaire* surrounding right-wing populists, no such impediments to presenting their positions on a general media platform existed for the ADR during the election.

While there exists no exit-poll data with which to analyse the election results, a Eurobarometer report from the winter of 2024 by the European Commission (2024) sheds light on the particularities of Luxembourg that contributed to the success or lack thereof of the ADR. The report looks at Luxembourgers' views on topics such as the EU and their economic situation, and it shows that compared to the EU average, Luxembourgers were far more satisfied with their economic situation and the EU.

Figure 4: Situation of the economy in our region (%)



Source: European Commission (2024)

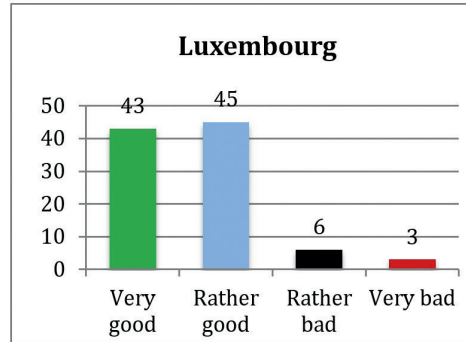
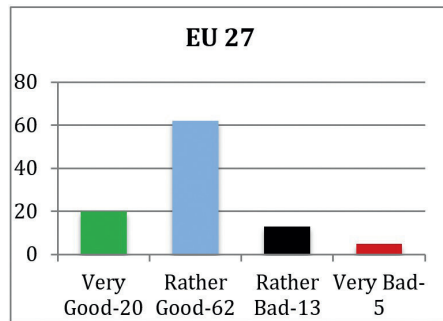


Figure 5: Quality of life in our region (%)



Source: European Commission (2024)

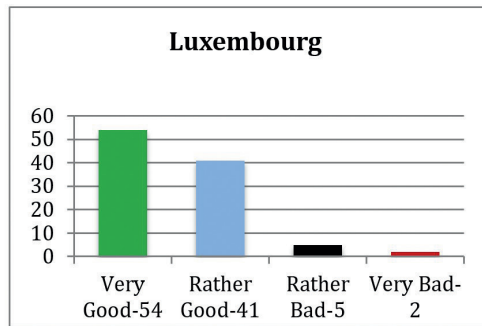
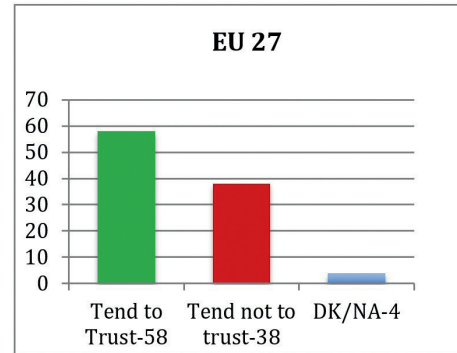


Figure 6: Trust in the EU (%)



Source: European Commission (2024)

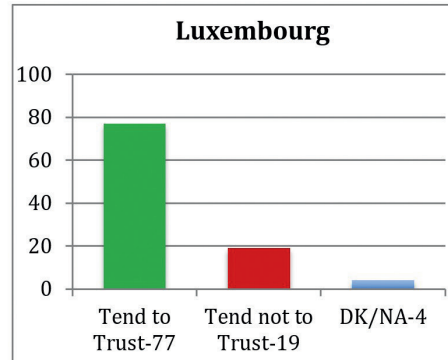
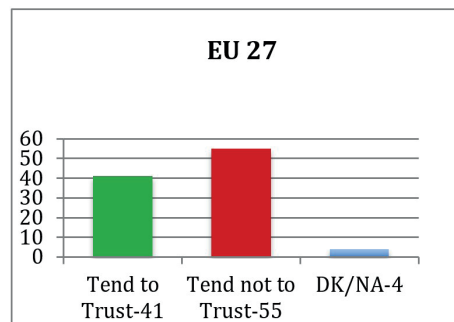
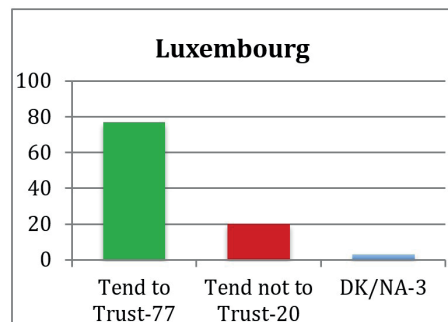


Figure 7: Trust in national government (%)



Source: European Commission (2024)



As Figures 4, 5, 6 and 7 demonstrate, those living in Luxembourg felt much better off economically and also had much higher levels of trust in their national government and the EU. These are generally indicators of success for right-wing populist parties and populist parties in general. That Luxembourg had strongly divergent responses compared to the EU 27 indicates the lack of demand for a right-wing populist party that is aggressively anti-EU or anti-immigration. These poll results also show the limited demand for a party like the ADR, which nuanced its criticisms of the EU with praise but also presented itself as an ‘outsider’ to the political establishment.

## Discussion and perspectives

An aggressive or radical right-wing populist party seen in other European countries is not electorally viable in Luxembourg, a well-off, highly international and economically interconnected country. As a result, the ADR modulates its discourse to appeal to a population that is largely optimistic about its general economic situation and its place within the EU (see also Carls, 2023). For this reason, it represents a more moderate form of right-wing populism and will likely be among the most moderate and pragmatic members of the ECR group in the EP.

In the EP, the ADR will likely prioritize the core issues it campaigned on: maintaining the right of veto on the European Council, opposition to federalist tendencies in the EU, opposition to the Green New Deal, a politics of peace in the Ukraine war, defending free speech and finding a solution to the migration crisis. In this respect, the ADR will not be much different than most other right-wing populist parties in Europe, especially those within the ECR. What will distinguish the ADR is its advocacy for the Luxembourgish language. Luxembourgish holds a special place in Luxembourgish politics not only as a cultural marker of national identity but also because C1 level (basically native fluency) is a requirement for almost all public sector jobs. These jobs are extremely well paid and ensure many Luxembourgers a good standard of living. Abolishing this requirement would remove Luxembourgers’ special access to this range of jobs (Carls, 2023). Having Luxembourgish recognized as an official European language in the EU would solidify its status in Luxembourg. This issue will likely be a top priority of Fernand Kartheiser.

Ultimately, political parties represent the views of those who support them. In Luxembourg there is little appetite for a right-wing populist party that is aggressively

anti-immigration or anti-EU. Quite simply, the country benefits too much from these aspects of European integration. Looking at trends in the EU more widely, Luxembourg seems quite exceptional in this sense. It is therefore difficult to extrapolate any recommendations or generalities from the Luxembourgish case.

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POLAND



# Dashed Hopes and the Success of the Populist Right: The Case of the 2024 European Elections in Poland

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## Abstract

The European Parliament elections of 9 June 2024 were the next stage in the electoral marathon started by parliamentary elections in 2023 and local elections earlier in 2024 and ended with a good result for the populist Law and Justice Party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) and the radical-right Confederation of Freedom and Independence (Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość), confirming the relevance of right-wing populist parties in Poland. The combined electoral outcome of both PiS (36.16%) and Confederation (12.08%) is only slightly below 50%. The hopes of all those who treated the 2023 parliamentary elections in Poland as a victory over populism, paving the way for more victories, were thus dashed.

The report aims to highlight the political and social context that led to these results and offer arguments supporting the classification of PiS and Confederation as populist communicators. The subsequent sections analyse the political communication strategies employed by both parties, emphasizing the intricacies of their discursive articulations concerning national and European themes. Lastly, the report explores the correlation between the political agendas of PiS and Confederation and the thematic preferences of their electorate, offering a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play.

**Keywords:** *Law and Justice; Confederation; populism; EP elections; right wing*

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The European Parliament elections on 9 June 2024, the next stage in the electoral marathon started by last year's parliamentary elections and this year's local elections, ended with a good result for the populist Law and Justice Party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) and the radical-right Confederation of Freedom and Independence (Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość) usually referred to simply as Confederation (Konfederacja). The hopes of all those who treated the 2023 parliamentary elections as a victory over populism, paving the way for more victories, were thus dashed. Although Prime Minister Donald Tusk and the ruling Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska, PO) framed this election as a contest between his coalition and all parties – including PiS – over the fate of the EU, PiS was still able to secure 36.16% of the vote despite low turnout in the countryside, where voters disproportionately favour PiS.

The elections also confirmed several findings by researchers that consider the EP elections to be 'second-order' elections. First, these elections are assumed to be less salient for voters as they do not influence national government formation. In fact, in Poland, the high turnout from the 2023 elections, mainly due to young people coming out to vote, led to the success of the liberal opposition at the time, was not repeated and mainly a hardcore electorate went to the polls. Second, the assumption that these elections favour parties of the radical right was confirmed, as they provide a credible and adequate context for articulating Eurosceptic and nationalist views. In the case of Poland, this meant the relative success of the radical-right Confederation, which has made explicit criticism of the European Union its hallmark. Third, there is the question of whether national themes predominate over pan-European ones in elections for the European Parliament. The assumption is that EP elections tend to reflect conflicts and rivalries within the domestic political arena rather than issues dealt with by the European Parliament. However, as this report details, it was not necessarily so in the 2024 EP elections in Poland, as national and European issues were articulated together, contributing to the larger discourse on Europe, its institutions, values and policies.

## The main populist actors and their results

The results of the 2024 EP elections confirmed the relevance of right-wing populist parties in Poland. The combined electoral result of both PiS (36.16%) and the Confederation (12.08%) is only slightly below 50%. Out of these two, PiS constitutes a 'quintessentially populist' party (Stanley, 2023), not only with respect to its discourse

but also in promoting and subsequently implementing policy solutions. If one adopts the widely shared view that populism is a kind of discursive logic that pits the people against immoral and corrupted elites, then PiS definitely has a populist character. PiS constructs a moralized dichotomy by positioning the traditional Christian nation against the ‘post-communist’ or ‘liberal’ elites (Bill, 2022). A significant element of PiS’s agenda includes anti-migration themes, which have contributed to the politicization and discursive shift in the public sphere since the so-called ‘migration crisis’ of 2015. This shift has led to the normalization of racist discourse and the securitization of migration issues (Krzyżanowska & Krzyżanowski 2018; Krzyżanowski 2020).

At the level of political action, populism combines colonization of the state with mass clientelism and discriminatory legalism (Müller 2016). Accordingly, after taking power in 2015, PiS immediately started dismantling institutional checks and balances, including the Constitutional Tribunal and Supreme Court and transformed the public broadcaster into the government’s mouthpiece (Sadurski, 2019). At the economic level, the party promoted generous social transfers, which not only allowed it to garner the support of beneficiaries but also to accuse political opponents of neglecting the people’s interests.

Such a populist formula allowed PiS to win a number of elections. In 2015, the party gained 37.5% of the votes, translating into 235 seats in the 460-member parliament, enabling the party to form a majority government that introduced all the changes it promised during the campaign. The expensive social transfers made after 2015 and further financial promises, as well as the rhetoric of threats targeted against LGBTQ+ people, secured PiS very good electoral results in the European Parliamentary elections in 2019, namely 45.4% of votes and 27 seats in the EP. The parliamentary elections held the same year brought PiS another victory; the party secured 43.6% of the votes and took 235 seats. It was exceptional not only in terms of the vote share, the highest for any political actor after 1989, but also in terms of the reelection for the second term with the overall majority (Szczerbiak, 2023). The ruling of the Constitutional Tribunal, an institution widely perceived as fully controlled by PiS, to introduce further restrictions into already harsh abortion law coupled with the series of financial and legal irregularities of PiS’s politicians systematically revealed by the media as well as the growing inflation contributed to the visible drop in public opinion polls. Although in the next parliamentary elections held on October 2023, PiS obtained 35.4% of the votes, it did not translate into the majority of the votes in the Sejm (the lower chamber of parliament), and the party was not able to form a government.





The second of the relevant right-wing actors is Confederation. Its classification poses decisively more challenges. Although The PopuList (Rooduijn et al. 2019) classifies the grouping as far right and Stanley (2023) adds that it is of libertarian rather than populist orientation, two caveats should be made here. Formally, the Confederation is a coalition of several parties that represent diverse views and target different segments of the population. New Hope, led by Sławomir Mentzen, is a libertarian party with a strong focus on economic issues, advocating for tax system simplification, tax cuts and neoliberal economic freedoms. Confederation also includes the National Movement, led by Krzysztof Bosak and the Confederation of the Polish Crown, founded by Grzegorz Braun. These groups combine (ethno)nationalism with moral and cultural conservatism, Euroscepticism, antisemitism and anti-Ukrainian sentiments. At least the latter two promote a nationalistic vision that merges anti-establishment rhetoric with the demonization of various groups. Additionally, as strategically calculating organizations, these political groupings adapt their communication strategies to the evolving political landscape and emerging challenges (Van Kessel & Castelein, 2016).

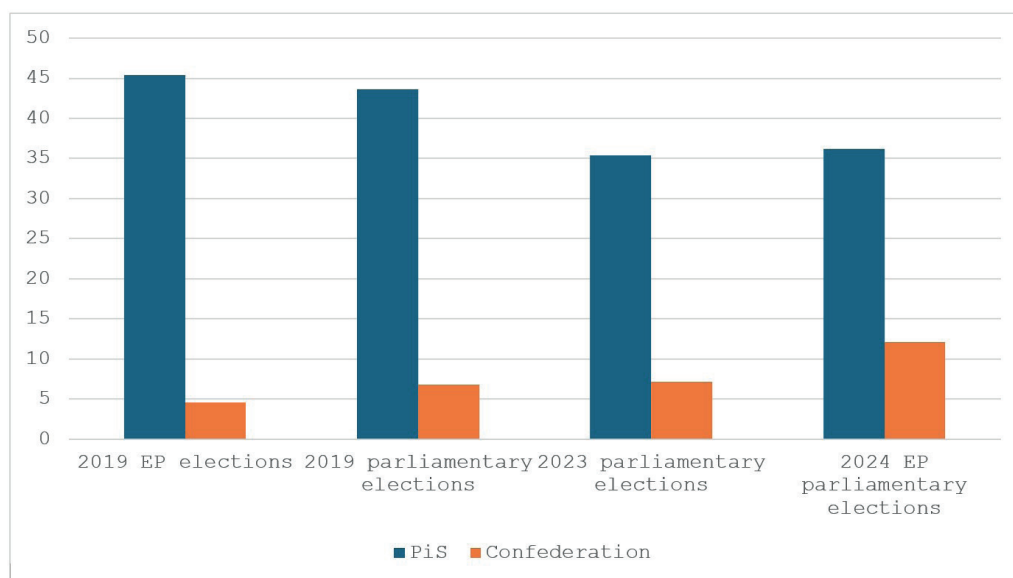
Since 2019, Confederation has slowly and consistently moderated its agenda, foregrounded free market aspects of its identity and economic discourse, dropped its antidemocratic messages and backgrounded or removed its most controversial figures. One crucial step was replacing the controversial leader Janusz Korwin-Mikke with Mentzen, a 35-year-old businessman and lawyer, and changing the name of one of the coalition parties 'KORWiN' to New Hope. Moreover, broadening the palette of the party communication with populist themes combined with populist performative strategies (like 'beer with Mentzen', a series of events organized across Poland when one of the leaders takes the stage with a mug of beer and talks about his political views emulating relaxed convention of stand up comedy genre) plus the skilful usage of the social media (with his 40 million views and 700,000 followers, Mentzen was the most popular Polish politician on Tik Tok) allowed the party to cross electoral threshold and to slowly build its popularity, particularly, among youngest cohorts of the electorate.

Confederation's initial attempts to win public support through radical and controversial messages underpinned by antisemitism (Mentzen's so-called Five Points: 'we don't want Jews, homosexuals, abortion, taxes and the EU') did not bring the party satisfactory results in the 2019 EP elections. The grouping fell below the electoral threshold, receiving only 4.6% of the votes (see Figure 1 below). That led to significant moderation in the October 2019 parliamentary elections and 2020 presidential elections, with communication that emphasized the economic agenda and radical background content, which enabled Confederation to get 6.8% of the

vote and win 11 seats in the 460-member Sejm. In the middle of 2022 the party experienced a slump in public support due to its implicit anti-Ukrainian agenda, manifested in references to the dramatic and sensitive aspects of Polish–Ukrainian history (the Volhynian massacre, in particular<sup>1</sup>) and emphasis on the differences in the two states’ national interests. Confederation also chided the PiS government for its overly generous aid for Ukraine. This stance – alongside the extreme polarization between PiS and PO that left no space for smaller actors and the (social) media activity of critical journalists that exposed the radically conservative and exclusionary programmatic assumptions of Confederation – may have influenced the lower-than-expected double-digit result in the 2023 parliamentary elections, which ultimately saw Confederation take 7.2% of the vote (see Figure 1 below).

Confederation nearly doubled its support in the subsequent 2024 European Parliament elections. This increase was attributed not only to the ‘second-order’ nature of the elections, which in many countries bolsters the radical right, but also to the favourable opportunity structure created by various contextual events related to European and domestic affairs in Poland.

Figure 1: Electoral support for PiS and Confederation in the 2019 and 2024 European and 2019 and 2023 national parliamentary elections (% vote share)



Source: <https://sejmsenat2019.pkw.gov.pl/sejmsenat2019/pl/wyniki/sejm/pl>; - <https://pe2019.pkw.gov.pl/pe2019/pl/wyniki/pl>; - <https://sejmsenat2023.pkw.gov.pl/sejmsenat2023/en/sejm/wynik/pl>; - <https://wybory.gov.pl/pe2024/pl/wynik/pl>

1. The Volhynian massacre occurred in during the Second World War when Ukrainian nationalists carried out a series of brutal attacks against the Polish population in the Volhynia and Eastern Galicia regions. The violence, which took place between 1943 and 1944, resulted in the deaths of an estimated 50,000 to 100,000 Poles, leading to deep-seated animosity between Poles and Ukrainians that has echoed through history.



## Campaign communication, populism and 2024 European Parliamentary election

### *The international and domestic context*

At the international level, a few key issues have been heavily politicized and used as campaign themes by PiS and Confederation. First is the European Green Deal, introduced in 2019, which aims to achieve climate neutrality in the EU by 2050. This policy package is ripe for political exploitation due to its likely uneven impacts on the budgets of households, businesses, industries, regions and member states. Secondly, the European climate and energy agenda might be easily represented as led by the European elites against the sovereign decision of the member states. Additionally, being the result of very complex decision-making based on even more complex scientific expertise makes it even more vulnerable to political exploitation and populist argumentation.

Another important issue which affected the Polish public debate was the European Council's approval in May 2024 of the EU Pact for Migration. The most controversial aspect of that was the so-called 'solidarity mechanism', which Poland's populist right framed as a false choice between accepting an unspecified number of immigrants or paying €20,000 per immigrant. This framing ignored the option of negotiating alternative forms of support.

The backlash was further fuelled by the tense situation at the Polish–Belarusian border, where Belarusian President Alexandr Lukashenko's regime transported foreigners from Africa and Asia to the border and forced them to cross. Both attempted and actual illegal crossings were met with a harsh and legally questionable response from the previous PiS government, a policy continued by the PO-led government after October 2023. This response included pushbacks, the introduction of the state of emergency, but also the idea of building the 187-kilometre-long physical wall and the electronic barrier equipped with cameras and motion detectors. These measures were justified by a strong anti-Muslim and orientalist discourse, introduced and normalized by PiS during the 2015 'migration crisis', which reduced refugees to stereotypes of illegal Muslim migrants intent on imposing their values or posing a terrorist threat.

The outbreak of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 and the resulting influx of refugees, of which approximately 1.5 million have stayed in Poland, constitutes

another dimension of context for the campaign communication (Duszczyk, Górny, Kaczmarczyk & Kubisiak, 2023). First, the populist right-wing government expressed a welcoming attitude towards Ukrainian refugees, granting them temporary protection, including access to the Polish healthcare system, schools and the job market, which stands in stark contrast with the Islamophobic and anti-migration discourse targeting refugees from the Polish–Belarusian border. Secondly, however, with the lapse of time, sociologists have observed some signs of growing compassion fatigue towards refugees staying in Poland yet in the second half of 2022, which makes the Ukrainian issue extremely vulnerable to politicization by radical populist parties (Sadura & Sierakowski, 2022; Baszczak, Winckiewicz & Zyzik, 2023).

Finally, two events preceded election day and strongly affected the discourse of the opposition. First, *Onet*, a leading news website, reported on 5 July that at the end of March and early April, three soldiers were detained after firing warning shots around a group of 50 people who were trying to cross the Polish–Belarusian border (Wyrwał & Żemła, 2024). The media information about detention coincided with the death of a Polish soldier on the same border, stabbed through the border fence with a knife attached to a pole and thrust in the direction of the soldiers by an unidentified man from the Belarusian side. The incident was part of a series of attacks and a surge in attempts at illegal crossings by migrants supported and forced by Belarussia and Russia. It created the discursive opportunity for the right-wing opposition, which accused the Tusk government of detaining the Polish soldiers responsible for the protection of the border and creating the freezing effect regarding the use of firearms for self-defence, which allegedly led to the death of the soldier.

## The political communication of PiS

PiS was consistent in keeping its ambivalence towards the EU, which was determined by the still strong popular support for EU membership, but on the other hand, it was blackmailed by the Eurosceptical, if not Eurorejectionist, agenda of Confederation. The tone of the campaign was set at the party convention on 27 April 2024, during which Jarosław Kaczyński declared that:

We are Poles, and we have Polish responsibilities. Our red and white team is entering this election, this great undertaking, with full conviction and full determination that we must defend Polish values, Polish interests and the Polish *raison d'état*. This means taking up the issues of the Green Deal, the migration pact, the



change of treaties, the euro, the protection of the Polish countryside, security and, finally, what is the essence of Polishness – freedom (Kaczyński 2024).

It clearly reveals the basic premise, lists the key issues of the campaign and informs about the master frame, providing the angle from which each of the listed issues was to be perceived. The contradictory relationship between national and European interests was perceived as a threat to freedom, which in the majority of contexts was understood as a right to absolute, exclusive sovereignty. During the convention inaugurating the campaign, the party presented a declaration containing a series of negative slogans exhibiting its attitude toward the EU:

We will cancel the Green Deal, stop the migration pact, stop the new treaty, defend the zloty, defend the interests of the Polish countryside in the EU, strengthen Poland's security and armaments, and defend Polish freedom. [...] The most important values to us are the welfare of the Fatherland and a better life. We are going to the European Parliament to defend the Polish national interest' (aja/X, 2024).

At the forefront of the listed issues was the European Green Deal, which the party portrayed in its communication as an ideological project of the EU elites aimed against ordinary citizens. As the party has argued, higher energy and transport prices will raise costs for ordinary Poles as well as for businesses and housing construction. Further, it will have a substantial impact on agriculture: 'Imposing so many different burdens on agriculture will lead to it first being in a very deep crisis, and in the long run, it will simply disappear' (Tak dla polskiego rolnictwa, 2024).

The construction of crisis and the politics of fear, discursive mechanisms typical for the populist right, were also employed to represent the Pact on Migration, which was labelled as a 'Trojan horse introduced to Europe', a 'particularly dangerous' solution, and an 'ideological project' that would allow the EU elites to impose any number of migrants or punish Poland with financial penalties. It was further claimed that the Pact on Migration would lead to uncontrolled, massive immigration that would eventually change the demographic structure of Europe, destroy national cultures and adversely affect the security of Poles. As Kaczyński claimed:



Wherever this phenomenon of illegal immigration appears, but also where this immigration has been legal for many years, we are dealing with such zones where basically no law applies, where one is afraid to leave his house even during the day (PiS, 2024a).

Moreover, campaign communication also contained many warnings regarding European treaty changes, which, if implemented, would lead to the centralization of the EU (conceived as German domination), complete erasure of Polish sovereignty and a threat to the national security and personal freedoms of ordinary people. Occasionally, the communication adopted a hyperbolic tone with the supposed adverse developments represented as part of the large plan of Western states, elites, ideologues, bureaucrats and lobbyists in collaboration with national elites to control weaker states in order to change their culture and exploit their economy: ‘Poland will no longer be a state, but simply an area of inhabitation of Poles. An area of inhabitation of Poles managed from outside’ (PiS, 2024d).

Interestingly, being aware that such communication exposed the party to the accusations of merely negative campaigning and planning to withdraw Poland from the EU, PiS attempted to reframe its message in a positive way. In particular, in the second part of the campaign, it promoted a series of ‘Yes’ slogans, for example: ‘#Yes for Poland!’, ‘#Yes for the Polish countryside’, ‘#Yes for investments’ or “#Yes for the defence of Polish borders’ (PiS, 2024b).

The party also explicitly declared its attachment to the EU and distanced from the Eurorejectonist slogans by emphasizing its vision of the Europe of Fatherlands as opposed to the populist perception of Europe as the elitist project targeted at the sovereignty and freedoms of ordinary people. Interestingly, although the security issue was an important part of the agenda, the war in Ukraine did not feature prominently in the campaign. In the end, the party used the incidents on the Polish–Belarusian border to articulate this issue together with the anti-migration discourse, legitimize its decision to build a fence and attack Civic Platform for criticizing this idea when it was in opposition.



Figure 2: PiS's Facebook post exemplifying the 'Yes!' campaign theme



Source: (PiS, 2024c).

## The political communication of Confederation

The electoral agenda of Confederation is best captured by the Facebook message posted two days before the elections, which deploys the visual metaphor of war to portray the relationship between the grouping and the EU and its policies (see Figure 3). The list of the issues mentioned in the picture to be fought with includes the European Green Deal, Fit for 55 (the EU's plan to reduce carbon emissions), the Pact for Migration, banning combustion engine cars, European taxes, restricting the use of cash, and the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive.

Figure 3: Confederation's Facebook post expressing attitude towards the EU



Source: (Konfederacja, 2024c).

The post neatly captures the Eurorejectionist attitude towards the EU, which is represented as a structure inimical to the national interests and the interests of ordinary Poles. Similarly to PiS, the main focus of attention was the European Green Deal, conceived as a prominent example of the madness of the EU elites driven by the socialist inclination to overregulate and the ideology of 'climatism'. The EU is a bureaucratic structure with the tendency to go beyond its legal treaty limitations and is conceived as detached from normal people. As the grouping claimed, 'We are going to the Europarliament to stop these absurd and harmful crazies coming from Brussels, because #WeWantToLiveNormally!' (Konfederacja, 2024a).

The essence of the grouping's stance is neatly captured by one of its leaders, Krzysztof Bosak:

I don't know if you've noticed the new platitude promoted by the Eurofederalist lobby in Poland: they call the principle of unanimity in the EU by the term 'liberum veto' and suggest that it is some kind



of systemic gangrene.<sup>2</sup> Thus, they admit that it is the EU and not Poland that is the new state reference point for them. It's power and decisiveness they care about. What they don't add is that the more prerogatives in Brussels, the less in Warsaw. This is a zero-sum game. The sovereignty being shifted to Brussels, Strasbourg and Luxembourg is being lost in Poland. Our influence on the vector of the evolution of EU policies oscillates around zero, and the veto is the last hard tool that can influence anything in this organization. Instead of further strengthening the Eurocracy, we need to regain control! (Konfederacja, 2024b).

Such a vision of European relations underpins the radically anti-establishment discourse of the Confederation, which allows the presentation of all the political elites as traitors of the Polish national interests. Contrary to the PO, which was conceived as representative of the interests of Germany, PiS's agenda was attacked for its hypocrisy or for stealing programmatic ideas from the Confederation.

The EU environmental policy solutions were attacked for detrimental effects on the development of the economies of EU member states and led to the drastic deterioration of the standards of living for ordinary Poles:

The entire policy of the European Union will lead to the poor becoming even poorer, and the process of weakening nation-states will gain even more momentum! That's why I'm going to the European Parliament to stop this madness and stand up for the interests of ordinary citizens! (Zajączkowska, 2024).

Populist strategies were used to articulate other ideological themes. In line with the libertarian currents of the Confederation's profile, the EU policies were also framed as illegitimate, ideological interference in ordinary people's lives. According to the Confederation, poor people will be forced, for example, to conduct costly renovations of their houses to fulfil energy standards of the EU's Energy Performance of Buildings Directive.

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2. The 'liberum veto' was a parliamentary mechanism in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth that required unanimity in voting, based on the principle of equality among all noblemen. In practice, this rule allowed a single deputy to adjourn the Sejm (Poland's parliament) and thus invalidate all its resolutions, leading to the paralysis of parliamentary proceedings and significantly impacting the political system in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Another key issue on the campaign agenda was the rejection of the EU Pact on Migration. Confederation did not shy away from using racist and Islamophobic rhetoric, portraying migrants as a dangerous threat to security, demographics and culture and as a burden on welfare systems. They not only supported strengthening existing borders but also advocated for amending laws to permit more liberal use of firearms against migrants. Although less prominent, they also criticized the so-called ‘privileges’ granted to Ukrainian refugees, portraying them as undeserving. Additionally, Confederation leveraged the incidents at the Polish–Belarusian border to promote its hardline stance on migration.

## The resonance of the campaign issues and the electoral support

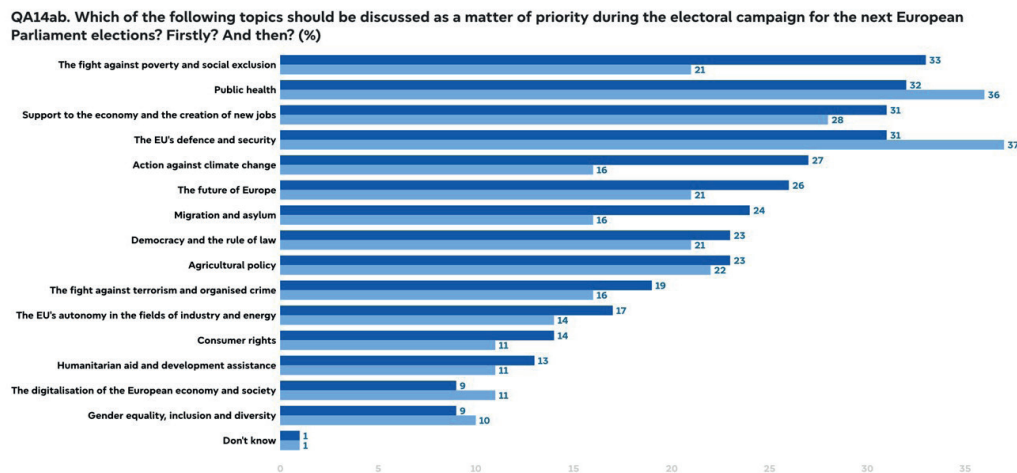
The results of the European Parliament’s Spring 2024 Eurobarometer sheds some light on the list of campaign topics of particular significance to Polish voters. According to the survey, the EU’s defence and security policy and public health ranked highest, 37% and 36%, respectively, among Polish voters. Support for the economy and creating new jobs (28%) and agricultural policy (22%) are of secondary interest. There is also a potential disconnect between the migration issue, one of the most potent topics for the political communication of the right-wing populists, and the interests of the voters. As the survey shows, migration and asylum scored only 16% despite extreme politicization of the issue and extensive media coverage, particularly just before the elections when the incidents on the Polish–Belarusian border took place. The timing of the survey might provide some explanation; in Poland, it took place in February, long before the campaign started. Second, the migration issue was embedded in the larger security narrative, a topic the voters recognized as the most important one. Interestingly, support for the actions against climate policy ranked at 16%, whereas at the EU level, the score was at 27%, which might explain why populist actors paid so much attention to the rejection of the European Green Deal and the Fit for 55 package.





Figure 4: Citizen's priorities ahead of the European elections (in %)

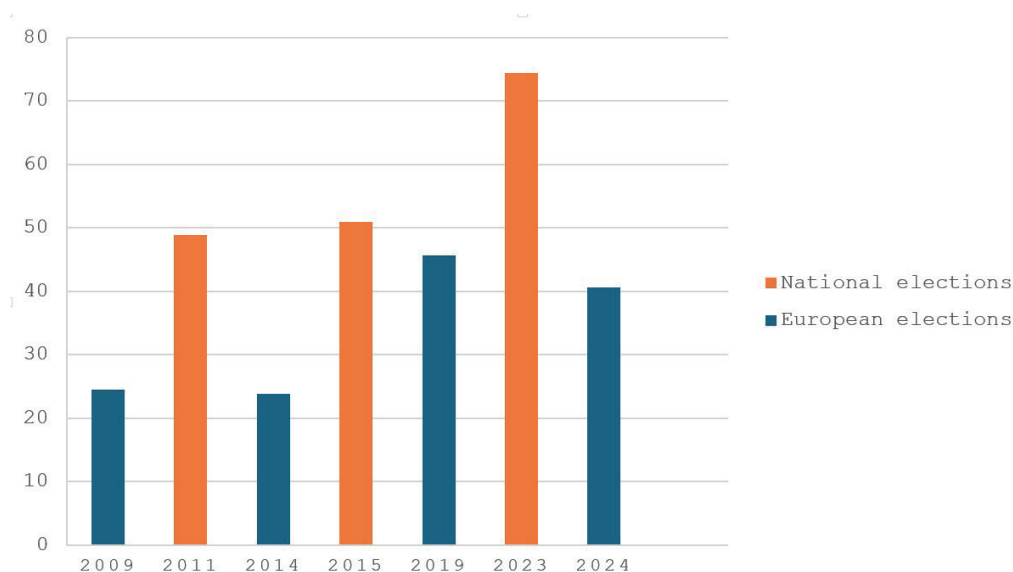
### CITIZENS' PRIORITIES AHEAD OF THE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS



Source: Eurobarometer, 2024.

The elections confirmed the structure of support for the right-wing populist electorate. First, PiS confirmed its support in rural areas (46.36% of voters) than in cities (30.67% of voters), among the elderly (only 16.2% of votes of those aged 29 and over and 46.1% of those over 60) and among less educated voters (TVN24, 2024). The Confederation was different, with as many as 30.1% voting for the group in the 18–29 age bracket. The breakdown by gender was also important: 16.5% of male eligible voters and 8.1% of female voters voted for the Confederation (very significantly, in this case, 0.3% more than for the Left). It is also worth noting the high loyalty of the PiS electorate, with only 8% of its 2023 voters supporting other groups. In the case of the Confederation, it was 16% (Katkowski, 2024). Interestingly, Confederation gained the support of the 165,000 PiS supporters (Machowski, 2024). Finally, the electoral turnout was significantly lower than during previous national elections (40.65% to 74.38%) but still relatively high if compared to the elections before 2023.

Figure 5: Electoral turnout in national and European elections in Poland, 2009-2024 (%)



Source: <https://pe2009.pkw.gov.pl/PUE/PL/WYN/F/index.htm>; - <https://wybory2011.pkw.gov.pl/att/pl/000000.html#tabs-1>; - <https://pe2014.pkw.gov.pl/pl/index.html>; - [https://parlament2015.pkw.gov.pl/349\\_Wyniki\\_Sejm.html](https://parlament2015.pkw.gov.pl/349_Wyniki_Sejm.html); - <https://sejmsenat2019.pkw.gov.pl/sejmsenat2019/en/frekwencja/pl>; - <https://sejmsenat2023.pkw.gov.pl/sejmsenat2023/en-frekwencja/pl>; <https://wybory.gov.pl/pe2024/pl/frekwencja/pl>

## Conclusions

Although the elections confirmed the strength of polarization and the importance of the PO and PiS divide, with the two largest parties winning a combined 73.22% of the electoral vote, this did not prevent the Confederation from gaining an important third place in the electoral competition. Discursive structures of opportunity related to the dramatic situation in the east resonated with the Confederation's securitized, anti-immigrant message. Moreover, as the oppositional actor, the grouping has greater credibility in proclaiming radical slogans than PiS, who previously held power.

Second, it appears that both parties will seek to slow down (PiS) or undermine (Confederation) the process of European integration and use the issues of immigration and environmental EU policies as important parts of the Eurosceptic agenda. Yet during the campaign, The Confederation announced that it would seek to establish a special commission in the European Parliament to investigate illegal immigration.

Third, the division on the right side of the political scene and the competition over the conservative electorate is also reflected at the European level as two actors joined



different political groups in the European Parliament. Being part of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group, PiS was courted by Viktor Orbán to join his new alliance called Patriots for Europe (Pfe). Initially, it seemed a very probable option for PiS if one takes public declarations of its politicians at face value.

Yet at the end of June, former Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki suggested in an interview with *Politico* that the option of joining Viktor Orbán was 50/50. As he declared, 'It's quite obvious that we could be united on a geographical platform and not [an] ideological platform. I'm less and less interested in all those ideological elements of the jigsaw' (cited in Wax, 2024). Nevertheless, it turned out it was part of the protracted negotiation strategy over the distribution of the posts in the group. Ultimately, the longstanding relations between PiS and Fidesz were not translated into an alliance with the party, which adopts an entirely different stance on Russia's aggression in Ukraine, the effectiveness of sanctions and the significance and scale of assistance for Ukraine. On 3 July 2024, it was announced that PiS would remain within ECR and renew its alliance with Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia.

The decision of which EP group to join was equally difficult for the Confederation, leading finally to internal divisions within the grouping. Only three out of six of the Confederation MEPs decided to join the Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN) group led by the pro-Russian Alternative for Germany (AfD). Stanisław Tyszka, one of the MEPs who joined the group, admitted the differences but also listed commonalities: 'opposing the EU's crazy climate policy, the immigration policy that threatens the stability of our countries and Europe, and attempts to build a European superstate' (Tyszka, 2024). Interestingly, all three politicians come from Sławomir Mentzen's New Hope, one of the groups that form part of the Confederation alliance. Two other MEPs from the National Movement (Ruch Narodowy) refused to join the group and started negotiations with Pfe.

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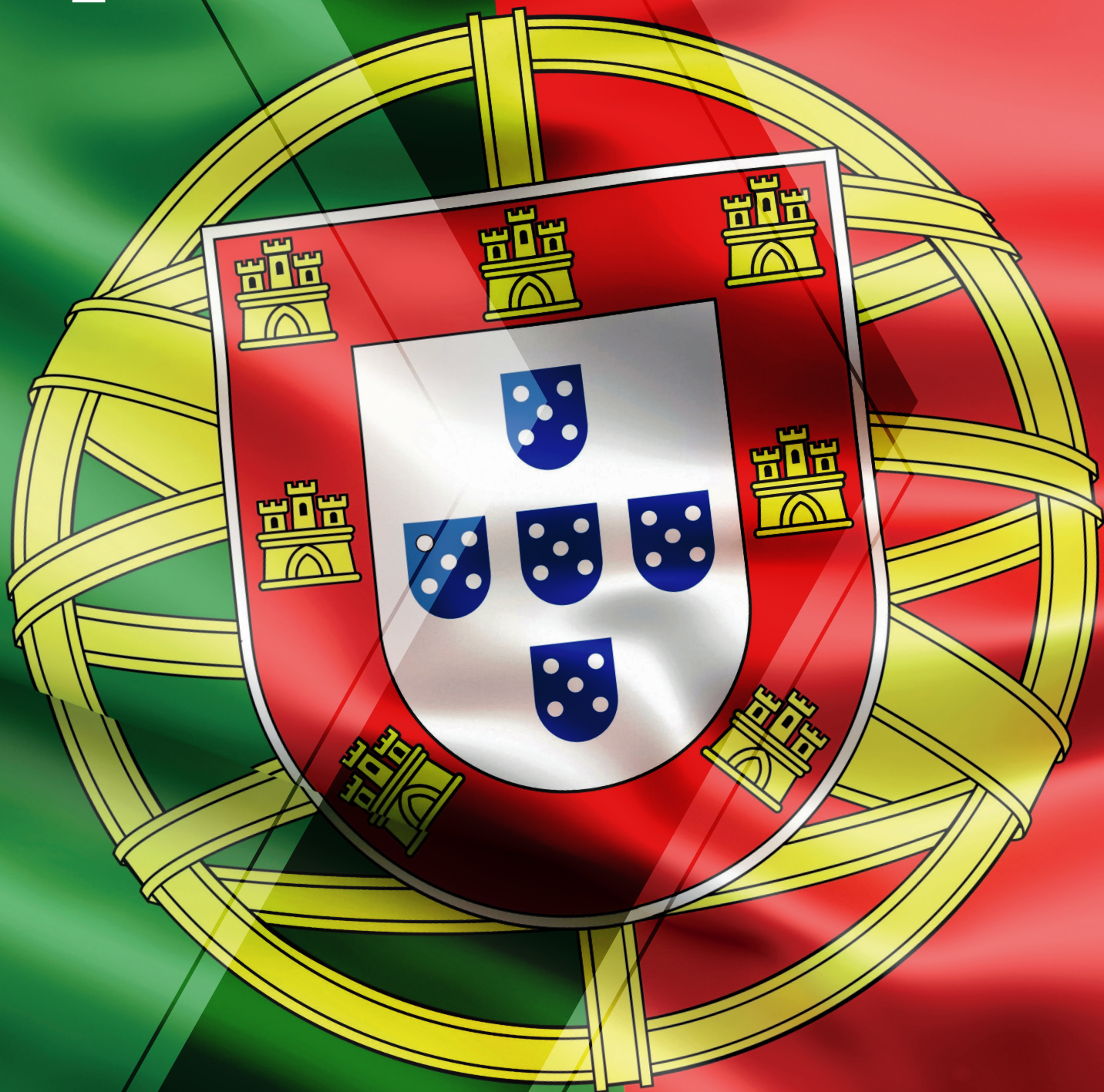


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PORTUGAL





# The 2024 European Elections and Right-wing Populism in Portugal

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## Abstract

Unlike previous European elections, the 2024 European election brought the discussion of European issues to the media and political agendas in Portugal, a country where most voters hold a positive image of the EU. Despite managing to elect its first two MEPs, the European election was not fertile terrain for Chega, as it stopped Chega's continuous electoral growth since 2019 and its objectives were not fully achieved. Poor candidate selection, overambitious goals, a disconnect between Chega's soft Euroscepticism and its supporters' mostly enthusiastic view of the EU, ambiguity about which European party group it would join, and intermittent support from its popular leader, André Ventura, were relevant factors influencing Chega's campaign and ensuing results. A relatively low turnout and overrepresentation of constituencies that are unlikely to vote for the populist radical right compounded the scenario.

**Keywords:** *Portugal; Chega; populism; European elections; António Tãnger Corrêa; André Ventura*

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## Introduction

The 2024 European election represented the first setback for right-wing populist politics in Portugal after five years of growth. Just three months previously, a snap general election gave the largest-ever representation for right-wing populist Chega (Enough). In this context, Chega publicly set its sights on winning the European elections outright, but poor candidate selection, a lacklustre campaign, a lack of clarity about Chega's preferences regarding European party groups, and a manifesto that did not conform to its own supporters' preferences contributed to hampering its goals. Thus, on 9 June, the dominant right-wing populist party in Portugal received around 783,000 fewer votes than it had in March while still electing its first two MEPs.

## Growth and reorganization of right-wing populist politics in Portugal (2019–2024)

In the 2019 European elections, the National Renovation Party (Partido Nacional Renovador, PNR) and the Basta coalition ('Basta' is a synonym of Chega) were the right-wing populist options. PNR is older and more radical, while Basta was a coalition of small conservative parties and movements led by André Ventura, the leader of Chega, then a splinter group from the centre-right Social Democratic Party (Partido Social Democrata, PSD). Both candidacies were unsuccessful, garnering a combined tally of around 65,000 votes.

Nevertheless, 2019 would turn out to be a pivotal year for Portuguese right-wing populism. In the general election held in October, Chega became the first right-wing populist party to achieve a parliamentary breakthrough, attaining 1.29% of the vote. Chega enhanced its position in two subsequent (snap) elections, in 2022 and 2024, increasing its vote share to 7.18% and 18.07%, respectively, becoming the dominant radical right-wing populist party and third largest overall.

Chega's agenda has focused on typical radical right-wing populist issues, such as corruption, immigration and security (Biscaia & Salgado, 2022; Mendes, 2022), as well as on the rhetorical construction of an in-group of 'righteous Portuguese' in opposition to out-groups and the political elite (Biscaia & Salgado, 2022). Foreign policy has not been Chega's priority. Its stances on the matter are often instrumental. Regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Chega adopted a pro-Ukraine position, aligned with most mainstream parties (Biscaia & Salgado, 2023). On the Israel-

Palestine conflict, it was clearly pro-Israel, claiming Netanyahu's government was entitled to 'neutralize the threat', and was the only parliamentary party that declined to join calls for a ceasefire (Agência Lusa, 2024a).

The sovereign debt crisis of the 2010s and subsequent austerity policies drove some voters out of the electoral market and cleared the way for smaller parties to make gains by bringing new issues to the fore (Lisi et al., 2020). Chega was the most successful party in capitalizing on these opportunities and managed to mobilize voters who had abstained in previous elections and maintain their vote, but also attracted voters who had previously voted for PSD and the Socialist Party (Partido Socialista, PS) in previous elections (ICS–ISCTE Surveys, 2024b). Anti-Roma sentiment and welfare chauvinism were key issues in Chega's growth even before its official founding, as Ventura's first run for local office, still with PSD, leaned heavily on Romaphobia (Bugalho, 2017). Similarly, Afonso (2021) has found that electoral support for the radical right in the 2021 presidential election in Portugal was disproportionately higher in those localities with greater concentrations of Roma populations and welfare beneficiaries. However, as concerns about immigration have intensified in Portugal, with support for restrictive migration policies reaching a slight majority (55%) in 2023–2024 (ICS–ISCTE Surveys, 2024c), migrants – especially Muslims – have become a more prominent target in Chega's rhetoric (e.g., Matos, 2024).

Other parties tried to emulate Chega's quick growth. The PNR rebranded as Ergue-te (Rise Up) shortly after Chega's success in 2019, but the move proved ineffectual, as it received a paltry 0.09% of the vote in the 2024 general election. The Democratic Republican Party (Partido Democrático Republicano, PDR), a centrist populist party (Salgado & Zúquete, 2017), also rebranded, taking on the name Democratic National Alternative (Alternativa Democrática Nacional, ADN) and establishing connections with ultra-conservative Brazilian evangelical groups (Vasco, 2024). The ADN baffled pundits in the 2024 general election by multiplying its previous election tally tenfold and qualifying for state funding despite narrowly failing to elect a single MP; the result was interpreted as a product either of influential political evangelicalism (Henriques, 2024) or confusion between its name and that of the Democratic Alternative (AD), a centre-right coalition composed of the PSD, the CDS–People's Party and the People's Monarchist Party (PPM) (Camilo, 2024).





## European election: candidates, manifestos and the campaign

Chega's lead candidate in the European election was António Tãnger Corrêa, a party vice president and former diplomat. A month before the election, 71% of poll respondents said they did not know who he was (CESOP Surveys, 2024a), and a few days before the election, 22% of survey respondents who had voted for Chega in March said they were still undecided about the European election (CESOP Surveys, 2024b). The candidate was perceived as eccentric, which was reinforced by his endorsement of conspiracy theories such as 'the great replacement' and use of antisemitic tropes, like accusing the Mossad of forewarning American Jews of terrorist attacks on 9/11 (e.g., Chagas, 2024; Malhado, 2024). Ventura, much more popular among Chega supporters, seemed not to prioritize the European election, spending significant time campaigning for regional elections in Madeira; he only joined Tãnger Corrêa in the last stretch of the campaign, trying to ensure improved media coverage.

Tãnger Corrêa was also ambiguous about Chega's membership in European political groups, refusing to address the issue and, at one point, saying voters did not need to know how the party would behave in the European Parliament (Oliveira Martins et al., 2024). Nevertheless, Chega had been a member of the Identity and Democracy group (ID) since 2020. Its views on European issues were generally aligned with those expressed on ID's program, such as its opposition to 'any supranational construction' and demand for stricter immigration control (Identity and Democracy Party, n.d.) as well as in drawing a 'sharp distinction between Europe and the European Union' and emphasis on intergovernmental cooperation mechanisms, as advocated for in ID's 'Declaration of Antwerp' (Identity and Democracy Party, 2022). However, only 5% of Portuguese Eurobarometer respondents have a negative image of the EU (Public Opinion Monitoring Unit, 2024), and Chega supporters are only slightly less enthusiastic. On average, they express positive views of EU and Eurozone membership, as well as further European integration. They differ from the mainstream mainly in expressing more disillusionment about the bloc's democratic nature: 46% of surveyed Chega supporters were 'reasonably' or 'extremely' satisfied with it, compared to 56% of PS supporters and 67% of those who identify with PSD (ICS-ISCTE Surveys, 2024a).

Aware of the EU's popularity in Portugal and among its supporters, Chega articulated some soft Euroscepticism in its European election manifesto: 'A Europa Precisa de uma Limpeza' (Europe Needs a Clean Up). Thus, the document conceded

that EU membership had ‘served the [Portuguese] national interest’ (Chega, 2024: 3) but defined Chega as ‘a deeply sovereigntist, pro-European, and Atlanticist’ party (Chega, 2024: 3) and claims that European institutions have been ‘overtaken by a narrow bureaucratic oligarchy that disregards member states’ identities and history and meddles in practically every dimension of life (Chega, 2024: 3–4). The manifesto envisioned intergovernmental cooperation guided by an ‘uncompromising’ defence of each member state’s national interest as the main policy mechanism and dismissed further integration (Chega, 2024: 6–7). Migration was presented as the foremost policy priority, arguing that it threatened ‘member states’ identity and security’ by pointing at ‘the situation in Germany, Italy, Greece, France, and Sweden’ (Chega, 2024: 7–8). Other stated priorities were expanding member states’ military capabilities to end ‘military reliance on the United States’ (Chega, 2024: 10) while urging that Portugal meet the minimum NATO commitment of 2% of GDP for annual defence spending (Chega, 2024: 10), and fighting corruption.

However, reinforcing the second-order nature of European elections in Portugal, Chega’s manifesto proposals were mostly focused on domestic policy, like abandoning the UN’s Global Compact for Migration, revoking the CPLP (Community of Portuguese Language Countries) mobility agreement, and establishing stricter rules for Portuguese naturalization. European-level proposals were scarce but included reinforcing the Frontex mechanism (Chega, 2024: 8), ending assistance for ‘NGOs that support illegal immigration’ and, vaguely, the ‘generalized adoption of the [immigration] models the UK has been implementing’ (Chega, 2024: 8). Despite Ventura having called for further sanctions on Russia in the past (Biscaia & Salgado, 2023), no specific course of action was proposed regarding ongoing wars.

Regarding the other populist parties’ lead candidates in the European election, ADN’s lead candidate was Joana Amaral Dias, a well-known former MP of Left Bloc (Bloco de Esquerda, BE), and Ergue-te selected Rui Fonseca Castro, a controversial former judge. ADN’s European election manifesto articulated what could be described as a denialist ideology. It urged peace between Russia and Ukraine, lamenting the loss of access to ‘cheap Russian energy’ (ADN, 2024: 4) and urging an end to sanctions (ADN, 2024: 25), opposed green transition initiatives as ‘turning science into a dogma’ and ‘making life impossible for European businesses’ (ADN, 2024: 7). ADN castigated ‘the failure of integration’ and demanded restrictive migration policies (ADN, 2024: 39). Ergue-te’s hard Eurosceptic manifesto ‘Libertar a Europa da União Europeia’ (Freeing Europe from the European Union) predicted and advocated for the ‘inevitable implosion’ of the



EU (Ergue-te, 2024: 4), but recognized that Portugal's exit from the bloc was 'for now, impossible' (Ergue-te, 2024: 2). It denounced migration, including of 'so-called refugees' (Ergue-te, 2024: 5) and proposed the reversal of same-sex marriage laws (Ergue-te, 2024: 7). Regarding national defence, Ergue-te stance is akin to Chega's, advocating for European 'military emancipation' from the United States, through the creation of a more robust defence industry (Ergue-te, 2024: 7).

Debates provided opportunities to set the agenda. In past European election campaigns, the media had been criticized for focusing excessively on domestic issues, but that was not the case in 2024, as debates focused on issues like immigration, defence, EU enlargement, and the potential nomination of the former prime minister, António Costa, as president of the European Council (Ribeiro, 2024; Ribeiro Soares & Martins, 2024). Apart from Costa's – at the time putative – nomination, the issues roughly corresponded with the electorate's assessment of the most important issues facing the EU, of which the war in Ukraine, the internal situation, immigration, and the economy came out on top (Public Opinion Monitoring Unit, 2024). Tãnger Corrêa participated in the mainstream televised debates but did not prove appealing to TV audiences, as his appearances were estimated to be the least watched (Borges Ferreira, 2024), and his assertions frequently fact-checked (e.g., Leal, 2024) and derided as too weird. ADN and Ergue-te participated in a single debate between smaller parties without parliamentary representation. However, these parties failed to seize the opportunity to reverse their image as fringe candidates.

## The election

In Portugal, as in other member states, European elections are considered second-order elections, and the 2024 European elections came at the uncertain beginning of a new political cycle in Portugal. PS, led by António Costa, had governed since 2015 and remained fairly popular throughout most of its long tenure, but several scandals deteriorated its image, and the AD coalition, led by PSD, narrowly won the 2024 snap general election. Its slim parliamentary plurality – 80 MPs to PS's 78 and Chega's 50 – means the new government must negotiate in parliament, including over the state budget. Pointing to similarities between PS and PSD, Ventura designated himself as 'the real leader of the opposition' and announced that Chega would not vote AD legislation through (Carrapatoso & Figueiredo, 2024). Tãnger Corrêa's candidacy was launched at this time, which partly explains Ventura's statement of Chega's objectives: to win the election, avoid a centrist majority in the

European Parliament and Ursula von der Leyen's re-election, and spearhead a 'grand European coalition, from Hungary to Lisbon' (Figueiredo, 2024).

The aftermath of the general election was still an important topic during the European Parliamentary election campaign and despite a slight increase in participation from the previous two elections (2014: 33.84%; 2019: 30.73%), only 36.47% of eligible voters deposited ballots on 9 June, compared to 59.84% in the March general election. Ultimately, PS, whose lead candidate, Marta Temido, owed her popularity to having been health minister during the COVID-19 pandemic, reversed the earlier results, narrowly beating AD, whose list was led by TV pundit Sebastião Bugalho. Both achieved vote shares of around 30% and fewer than 40,000 votes separated them. Similarly, left-wing parties' results were akin to those in March, and the Portuguese Communist Party (Partido Comunista Português, PCP), the BE, and Livre (Free) all tallied at around 4%. However, only the former two managed to elect an MEP.

The most significant differences in results happened on the right: despite lower participation, Liberal Initiative (Iniciativa Liberal, IL) gained nearly 40,000 votes more than in the general election, up to 9.08%, and elected two MEPs. Conversely, Chega lost nearly 783,000 votes from its general election tally despite holding on to third place and also electing two MEPs, with 9.79% of the total vote. Chega's losses were greater than any other party's, and, unlike in the general election, it failed to capture first or second place in any electoral district in Portugal. However, it did repeat wins in constituencies abroad, like Switzerland or Brazil.

Chega's loss can also be partially explained by a more challenging context in this election, namely concerning voter demographics, since older and more educated voters, who are more likely to vote in low-turnout elections and less likely to vote for the right-wing populist party, were estimated to have been overrepresented (Magalhães, 2024). On the night of 9 June, Tânger Corrêa described the day as 'not good', and Ventura admitted Chega 'did not achieve its goals' but found comfort in obtaining more votes than in 2019 and electing MEPs (Camilo, 2024b). The ADN and Ergue-te failed to elect any MEPs, attaining 1.37% and 0.16% of the total vote, respectively. Despite the ADN's similar vote share compared to March, it lost nearly half of its votes, reigniting the debate over its previous result. Additionally, Ergue-te's marginal result seems to confirm its fringe status once again, but also that of hard Euroscepticism.



## Conclusion

The 2024 European election capped a cycle of uninterrupted growth for Chega that started at its launch in the 2019 European elections. During that period, Chega managed to go from parliamentary breakthrough to 50 MPs, sparking the reorganization of its area of the political field, namely the rebranding of extant parties that Chega overtook and the appearance of new players interested in replicating its success in mobilizing non-voters. Chega's expectations were high in the 2024 European elections, and Ventura publicly set the win as Chega's goal. Nevertheless, the nomination of the eccentric António Tãnger Corrêa and enhanced media scrutiny weakened the campaign. For the first time since its foundation, Chega received fewer votes than in the previous election despite electing its two first MEPs, Tãnger Corrêa and Tiago Moreira de Sá. It is too early to predict whether this result will have any lingering effects on the party at the national level, as Ventura's popularity among Chega supporters and media visibility remain undiminished.

Similarly, it is not straightforward to predict what the Chega MEPs' main legislative priorities will be. The party joined the new Patriots for Europe (Pfe) group along with other right-wing populist mainstays like France's National Rally (RN) and the Freedom Party of Austria (both formerly in ID), as well as Spain's Vox, part of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group until July 2024, and Fidesz, which left the European People's Party (EPP) in 2021. The new group's manifesto advocates for similar principles as the ID's, asserting that the EU has 'turned against Europeans and now pursues interests contrary to the will of the Nations, Regions, and small communities that constitute our European home' (Patriots for Europe, n.d.), while pledging to 'prioritize sovereignty over federalism' (Patriots for Europe, n.d.). Chega MEPs will likely join initiatives designed to restrict immigration and bolster European military-industrial capacity, as both were presented as priorities in Chega's manifesto.

However, it is less clear how Tãnger Corrêa's views on the invasion of Ukraine will influence his voting record. On 17 July, he abstained on a resolution recommitting the EU to ongoing support for Ukraine (Antunes & Figueiredo, 2024). However, attempts to block further financial and military aid to Ukraine would put him at odds with Chega's official position. Regardless, Chega's MEPs will almost certainly not prove decisive in defining Pfe's priorities. Despite Tãnger Corrêa's nomination as one of its vice presidents, the group looks set to be steered by more influential players in the European right and the radical right-wing populist milieu.



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ROMANIA



# Charting Populist Pathways: Romanian Populism's Journey to the European Parliament

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## Abstract

This report examines the landscape of the far right in Romania within the context of the 2024 European Parliament elections. Two Romanian far-right parties secured seats in the European Parliament: the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) and SOS Romania (SOS), receiving 14.9% and 5% of the valid votes, respectively. Both parties emphasize the defence of Romanian sovereignty and promote nativist and authoritarian rhetoric. However, over the past year, the AUR has increasingly incorporated neoconservative elements into its platform. Consequently, the 2024 campaign has revealed notable differences in programs, candidates, styles of political campaigning and alliance strategies.

*Keywords:* far right; Romania; European Union; conservatism; sovereignty; political alliances

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## Introduction

In the December 2020 legislative elections in Romania, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) performed surprisingly well despite being established only a few months prior, in September 2019. Since then, the AUR has increasingly positioned itself as a significant opposition party, engaging critically with the state of Romanian democracy. Central to its political platform is the defence of Romanian sovereignty. The party utilizes populism to mobilize support, often framing society in stark terms: the pure and genuine Romanian people ('us') versus the corrupt elites ('them'), namely, mainstream political parties, cosmopolitan intellectuals, NGOs and similar entities. This division is further reinforced by nativist rhetoric, which emphasizes the organic nature of the Romanian community and underscores various threats posed by non-native elements. While Western societies often view these threats as originating from migrants, in Romania, ethnic minorities such as Hungarians are frequently singled out in this narrative. As such, the AUR's ideological stance incorporates nativism, authoritarianism and populism, which aligns with what Mudde (2007) identifies as a populist radical right party.

The AUR's radical dimension (Pirro, 2023) manifests in its opposition to key features of liberal democracy, particularly aspects related to personal liberties. However, the AUR does not seek to undermine democratic institutions but rather draws an ideological boundary with the liberal pillar of liberal democracy, delineating the frontier between the in-group and the out-group (Kauth & King, 2020). Specifically, the in-group comprises Romanian natives and their families, guided by the Christian faith and traditions (Program of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians, 2020).

Political parties are not monolithic entities; they often accommodate multiple political projects within one organization. The AUR exemplifies such diversity, where the original dual leadership represented at least two compatible ideological strands: one primarily oriented towards a unionist platform integrated with populist radical right features; the other focused on conservatism as a cultural, social and political vision opposing cosmopolitan and liberal values, while emphasizing traditional forces such as nature, God, and historical heritage (Drolet & Williams, 2018). A significant convergence point between these strands is their opposition to aspects of the established socio-cultural order characteristic of post-communist liberal democracy. In this context, the European Union (EU) is directly targeted as a source of disruptive values for the Romanian organic community. Criticisms are focused on a wide range of policies and norms perceived to limit national sovereignty, such as the recognition

of homosexual families and restrictions on personal liberties like the use of cash.

Beyond the AUR, the landscape of Romanian politics features various actors challenging the status quo. One such prominent figure is Diana Șoșoacă, who emerged as an extremely vocal political leader. Elected on the AUR list in the 2020 legislative elections, Șoșoacă was later expelled and joined SOS Romania, a party whose name viscerally reflects its core narrative: the urgent need to save Romania. Nativist, authoritarian and populist dimensions resonate in her discourse, echoing the need to defend national sovereignty against the EU and other foreign interests. However, there are differences in intensity and content compared to the AUR. Her communication style is characterized by a highly confrontational manner and a narrative of perpetual crisis. Șoșoacă's unconventional performance serves as a substitute for party organization and autonomous political identity, making both her political style and messages potentially disruptive to the democratic status quo. From this perspective, SOS Romania embodies the potential for extremism.

Romania's political landscape appears complex in the aftermath of the 2024 European Parliament elections. While it is acknowledged as a bastion of political stability and pro-EU sentiment, with the coalition of mainstream parties – the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the National Liberal Party (PNL) – securing a significant victory with 48.5% of the valid votes (See Table 1 below), there is also notable representation of MEPs from parties advocating radical right stances. This report analyses the historical trajectories of two Romanian parties embodying such views, scrutinizing their campaigns for the EP, evaluating their electoral platforms and profiling their candidates.

## The far right strikes back: Romanian insights

Following a period of dormancy in the early 2000s, the far right (Pirro, 2023) made a significant resurgence in Romania's political landscape. Initially operating outside parliament, the Romanian far right gained considerable momentum following the 2020 legislative elections. While the AUR secured substantial parliamentary representation, it also became a focal point for nativist, authoritarian and populist discourses. In parallel, the AUR has faced several internal challenges, marked by the departure of key figures like Șoșoacă, who has since become the leading figure in the rival SOS Romania party.

Additionally, other members of the AUR have splintered off to establish their



own political entities. For example, Smaranda Lup, once influential within the AUR's Cluj branch, cofounded the RO-EXIT party. This new party explicitly advocates for Romania's withdrawal not only from the EU but also from organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). However, despite these developments, the electoral potential of these smaller parties remains relatively limited.

## Two projects in one

Founded out of a blend of activism, AUR's founding leadership focused on two main lines of mobilization associated with the political figures George Simion and Claudiu Târziu, who jointly led the party from 2019 to 2022 (Soare & Tufiş, 2023). Since the early 2000s, George Simion has been deeply engaged in grassroots activism, particularly focusing on anti-communist and pro-union causes. Over time, he emerged as the primary spokesperson for the party. Meanwhile, Claudiu Târziu leveraged his journalism background and connections within right-wing networks. Through his blog, Târziu consistently advocated for preserving Christian conservative values within contemporary Romanian democracy. Simion and Târziu jointly advocated for the defence of Romanian identity, sharply underlining its historical heritage as a bulwark against perceived threats from both domestic and international influences.

These principles were fundamental to the AUR's platform, which was organized around four conservative pillars: faith, nation, family and liberty. Their platform aimed to counter what they viewed as the erosion of traditional values since the communist era. Integral to their approach was a robust anti-establishment stance and a communication strategy that fostered closeness with the Romanian populace. For instance, AUR voters have been invited to participate in personal milestones such as George Simion's marriage, which aimed to strengthen their connection with supporters on a personal level.

Against this backdrop, two distinct roles emerged among the AUR's leading figures. George Simion embodies a functional role akin to a modern *tribunus plebis*, an elected representative tasked with vocally defending Romanians against corrupt and abusive politicians. Conversely, Claudiu Târziu pursues an intellectual specialization in close collaboration with prominent conservative intellectuals such as Sorin Lavric.

## Looking for international/European partners

Târziu's role as the party's intellectual leader involved networking with conservative and far-right parties across Europe and globally. This role became pivotal in preparing for the 2024 EP elections, with the AUR strategically targeting membership in the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group. This strategy received support from grassroots engagements between the AUR extraterritorial branches and local politicians from parties like Vox and Brothers of Italy (Soare & Tufiş, 2023). Concurrently, the party bolstered official political networking efforts, exemplified by George Simion's participation in Italy's Atreju festival organized by Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia (FdI). While some encounters, such as Simion's reportedly contentious reception at Vox's Madrid meeting in January 2022 – purportedly due to objections from Fidesz over anti-Hungarian statements – were framed in the media as setbacks, these engagements remained integral to AUR's strategic outreach.

By October 2022, the AUR had established the Mihai Eminescu Conservative Political Studies Institute in Bucharest. As the institute's director, Claudiu Târziu expanded its influence through political networking and international conferences. These gatherings hosted a spectrum of international political representatives and intellectuals, providing a platform to articulate conservative visions for Europe and advocate for national sovereignty. One notable event, titled 'Make Europe Great Again', took place in Bucharest in April 2024. Explicitly referencing Donald Trump's 'MAGA' slogan, the conference aimed to address concerns about Europe's perceived decline. It featured prominent intellectuals, politicians, journalists and activists from Europe, Israel, the United States, Canada and Latin America.

Cristian Terheş, a former MEP with the ECR group, played a pivotal role in this context. In December 2023, he joined the Romanian National Conservative Party (PNCR) and soon became its president. The PNCR subsequently forged alliances with the Republican Party of Romania, the Peasant National Alliance, the National Identity Force and the National Renaissance Alliance, forming a coalition with AUR for the European Parliament elections. The gate towards the ECR was definitely open.

## The topics of reference

Since its electoral breakthrough in 2020, the AUR has championed the defence of Romania's political, economic and sociocultural interests. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the AUR emerged as a prominent advocate for personal liberties,



staunchly opposing mandatory vaccination, with some representatives endorsing anti-vaccination conspiracy theories. Additionally, the party has criticized European bureaucracy, portraying mainstream parties as subservient to the EU and betraying national interests. AUR has also voiced concerns over EU values, particularly regarding LGBTQ+ rights, advocating for the traditional family as a defence against what they perceive as European intrusions.

Simultaneously, the AUR has consistently emphasized the protection of Romanian communities in neighbouring states and the rights of nonresident economic migrants. Party representatives regularly accuse the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR) of being a 'chauvinistic entity' that promotes 'terrorism against Romanians' while also criticizing mainstream parties for their perceived political subservience (Fati, 2024).

In the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the AUR has taken nuanced positions. While denouncing Russia's interference as a significant obstacle to unification with Moldova, the party also criticizes Ukrainian discrimination against ethnic minorities, particularly Romanians.

## Emerging competitor: The origins of the SOS Romania party

Despite its young age, the AUR has become a fertile breeding ground for more radical and extremist platforms, exemplified *in primis* by Şoşoacă, a Romanian lawyer whose political career was boosted by her election as a Romanian senator on the AUR lists in 2020. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Şoşoacă became one of the most well-known faces of the antivaccine movement, regularly criticizing the government's defensive measures (Arun, 2024). More generally, Şoşoacă has pushed populist rhetoric to new extremes with tough homophobic, ultra-nationalist, xenophobic and anti-European messages. She proudly presents herself as the first Romanian MP to advocate for a 'Ro-exit', stating,

Since we have been in the European Union, we have ruined ourselves! And, under these circumstances, all I can say is RO-Exit! If you relinquish all industry to the European Union, That's what you did with the PNRR [i.e., National Recovery and Resilience Plan, supported by the EU's post-COVID-19 recovery fund]! You made fun of all the state companies in Romania! You sacrificed our



sovereignty for this! Never! The Romanian Constitution must never be subordinated to EU treaties. Shame on those who have betrayed Romania and its people! (SOS Romania, 2022).

Her theatrical, patriotic speeches are characterized by aggressive gestures and coarse vocabulary, in which she regularly denounces the ruling parties and emphasizes her proximity to the people. She regularly dresses in traditional popular costumes and voices concerns for Romanian traditions and values at risk of extinction. Şoşoacă has also emerged as one of the most vocal supporters of pro-Russian stances in Romania. She was declared ‘Personality of the Year’ in 2021 by Sputnik, a Russian broadcaster and purportedly sought to promote her messages on Vkontakte, the Russian social media platform (Arun, 2024). In March 2022, Şoşoacă and other MPs paid a high-profile visit to the Russian embassy in Bucharest to present a position of neutrality regarding the ongoing war. One year later, she sparked significant controversy with an interview given to a Russian publication, in which she claimed that Romania is essentially a ‘colony’ within the European Union. She further asserted that Europeans and Americans aim to destroy Russia and argued that Ukraine illegally occupies territories, including some that rightfully belong to Romania (Despa & Vovesz, 2024).

Regarding the armed conflict between Israel and Hamas-led Palestinian militant groups taking place in the Gaza Strip since 7 October 2023, Şoşoacă distinguished herself from the establishment by not participating in the pro-Israel rally organized in Bucharest in the aftermath of Hamas’ 7 October attack. Her position was motivated as less connected to foreign policy choices and more about her fear of drawing Romania into the war. Furthermore, media reports have highlighted her controversial remarks, including instances of antisemitism. For instance, during a joint session of parliament dedicated to the Day of Solidarity and Friendship between Romania and Israel in May 2024, Şoşoacă complained that this day should serve to commemorate Romanian martyrs from communist prisons, criticizing what she viewed as an incorrect focus on antisemitism. She protested that Romania saved over 400,000 Jews during the Second World War (Cotidianul, 2024).

## The pursuit of consensus for the European Parliament elections

The AUR presented a strong list of 43 candidates for the European Parliament



elections in June 2024, with Cristian Terheş and Claudiu Târziu featuring prominently at the top. The list included notable figures such as Gheorghe Piperea, known for bringing large class-action lawsuits against commercial banks over abusive credit contract commissions, and Georgiana Teodorescu, a vocal advocate for traditional family values. Also included were Adrian Axinia, an AUR MP closely associated with George Simion and serving as one of AUR's vice presidents. The list comprised various AUR members, lawyers, entrepreneurs, Monica Iağăr, a former athlete, the actress Mara Nicolescu and several academics.

Although the extent of its territorial organization within Romania or abroad remains unclear, SOS Romania succeeded in fielding 43 candidates for the European Parliament elections, including lawyers, a journalist, local councillors and other party members. The first two positions on the party list were occupied by Şoşoacă herself, followed by Luis Lazarus, a journalist trained at the TV stations owned by the controversial former journalist and populist politician Dan Diaconescu.

Regarding the mood of Romanian citizens in the context of the European elections, the Parliament's Spring 2024 Eurobarometer reveals strong interest among Romanian citizens, fully aligned with the European average (EP Spring 2024 Survey). However, Romanian citizens express a more critical and nuanced view towards different aspects of the European arena, particularly concerning the EU's impact on their daily lives. While almost three-quarters of European citizens state that EU actions impact their daily lives, only 65% of Romanians share this opinion. Similarly, although a large majority of Europeans (71%) agree that their country benefits from EU membership, only 65% of Romanians share this view. On the eve of the election, this indicates that there is a fertile breeding ground for parties voicing concerns and criticisms of the EU.

## The AUR's campaign focus

Since its electoral breakthrough in 2020, the AUR has been an ardent advocate in defence of Romania's political, economic and sociocultural interests. Unsurprisingly, the party's campaign for the EP elections emphasized Romania's Christian identity and safeguarding the family as the cornerstone of society. The party's platform notably advocated for the Republic of Moldova's accession to the EU, viewing it as a strategic step towards uniting the Romanian states. AUR's 11-point manifesto addressed a wide array of issues, from EU relations to specific sectors such as youth,

poverty and environmental policies. Conducted concurrently with the local elections, the AUR's EP election campaign echoed Euroscepticism, targeting specific policies rather than the EU project itself.

AUR has a dedicated website (<https://europarlamentari2024.ro/candidati-aur/>) and a Facebook page (Europarlamentari AUR, 2024) to disseminate its message. Central to the AUR's European vision was a staunch opposition to cosmopolitanism and globalism, advocating instead for European integration rooted in sovereign national identities. The party endorsed Poland's model of preserving national languages, cultures and traditions as exemplary.

Among its key policy points, AUR emphasized the need to stimulate the return of Romanian migrants by combating poverty and facilitating access to European funds for small rural businesses. A recurrent argument was the reduction of administrative rigidity and an open fight against the double standards that penalize Eastern member states.

During the campaign, AUR candidates urged Romanian voters to choose between defending Romanian sovereignty or succumbing to what they termed 'Romanian vassalage'. Symbolically, AUR's program insisted that politics should reflect the general will, specifically the will of national voters:

Politics in Romania must be done at home, not in Brussels or in Moscow. Although alliances with our strategic partners, both European and international, must be consolidated, AUR wants a different approach, one of alliances for the benefit of the country, not for the interests of the parties (AUR's Plan for the European Parliament, 2024).

## SOS Romania party's campaign

SOS Romania's campaign primarily focused on Șoșoacă, highlighting concrete measures outlined in a very concise program. The program advocated for Romanians' rights to continue using traditional energy sources like firewood and natural gas, reopening coal mines, and demanded compensation from the European Commission for the costs and side effects associated with COVID-19 vaccines. The program vigorously denounced perceived breaches of national sovereignty and criticized what it viewed as double standards in EU product regulations while emphasizing the protection of Romanian farmers and agriculture.



Aligned with AUR, SOS Romania advocated resisting digital or centralized financial systems (e.g., supporting the continued use of cash for consumer payments) and, in general, supported simpler fiscal regulations from Brussels. Şoşoacă also called for Romania to adopt neutrality in geopolitical matters, opposing the country's involvement in the Ukraine conflict. The candidate and the party program staunchly defended the supremacy of Romania's constitution over any international or European institution. SOS Romania also championed Christian values and traditions, opposed imposed globalism and the LGBTQ+ agenda, and advocated for prohibitive measures against gender education, sex change operations and same-sex marriage in Romania.

## The electoral results

In the 2024 European Parliamentary elections, the far right emerged as the second political force in Romania, closely trailing the coalition of PSD and PNL (Table 1). Combining the votes for AUR and SOS Romania, these two parties collectively secured almost one-third of the votes. While AUR's result represents a contraction from the 20% voting intentions registered in the preceding year, SOS Romania's final outcome came as a surprise. Initial exit polls had placed the party below the threshold, a trend confirmed by early official national results. The turnout among nonresident voters was the decisive factor in overturning the initial forecasts.

Table 1. 2024 European election results for Romania

Party	Votes	Share of votes (%)	MEPs (out of 33)	Parliamentary group affiliations (number of MEPs affiliating)
PSD-PNL Alliance	4,341,686	48.5	19	S&D (11) EPP (8)
AUR Alliance	1,334,905	14.9	6	ECR (6)
United Right Alliance	778,901	8.7	3	Renew (2) EPP (1)
Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania	579,180	6.5	2	EPP (2)
SOS Romania	450,040	5.0	2	NA (2)
Ştefănuţă Nicolae Bogdănel (Independent)	275,796	3.0	1	Greens/EFA (1)

Sources: Central Electoral Bureau (2024) and European election results (2024)

Interestingly, despite their focus on unification processes, the mobilization of AUR and SOS was notably lower in the Republic of Moldova, particularly in comparison

to mainstream parties. Nonresident voters awarded AUR the highest number of votes in five countries with substantial migrant communities: Spain, Belgium, France, Austria and the United States. Şoşoacă's leadership notably attracted voter support in the United Kingdom, Germany, and Italy (Central Electoral Bureau, 2024). The election results thereby validated AUR and SOS as the primary opposition forces. SOS Romania secured as many MEPs as the liberal Save Romania Union, while AUR doubled the representation of the United Right Alliance.

Benefiting from extensive pre-election networking efforts and Terheş' previous affiliation with the ECR, AUR MEPs have joined this group. The official announcement was made ten days after the elections, coinciding with the news that the ECR had become the third-largest group in the new European Parliament. On the same day, Hungary's Fidesz announced via X that it no longer sought to join the ECR, citing explicit concerns over AUR's extreme anti-Hungarian positions.

Notably, AUR's inclusion in the ECR group came with an agreement to support the Ukrainian cause. This agreement is particularly significant given that George Simion has been deemed *persona non grata* in both Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova due to his irredentist views. Şoşoacă and Lazarus, the two SOS MEPs, remained isolated from alliances at the European level. Despite approaching the emerging Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN) group in the EP, their candidacy was rejected by the Alternative for Germany (AfD), the group's founding member. Şoşoacă's opposition to conventional politics became visible in her maiden speech in Parliament in July, where she accused the EU of ruining Romania by providing aid to Ukraine and called for stopping the supply of weapons to Kyiv. In a move laden with symbolism, she was eventually escorted out of the Strasbourg chamber after repeatedly disturbing Valerie Hayer during the debate following a speech by the European Commission president, Ursula von der Leyen. On this occasion, she wore a dog's muzzle on her face (Starcevic, 2024).

## Conclusions

This report has explored the landscape of the far right in Romania against the backdrop of the 2024 EP elections. The emergence of AUR and SOS Romania as significant political players underscores the growing influence of populist narratives in Romanian politics. With its increased emphasis on a conservative platform and Romanian sovereignty, AUR positioned itself within the ECR group, aligning with softer Eurosceptic stances. In contrast, SOS Romania, led by the outspoken Diana





Șoșoacă, projected a more confrontational stance, challenging mainstream narratives with outspoken critiques of EU policies and advocating for nationalist agendas, including calls for territorial revisionism.

Despite facing rejection from the main EP groups, SOS Romania's representation in the European Parliament alongside AUR highlights the diversity of strategies employed by the far right in contemporary politics. Their campaigns resonated with segments of the electorate disillusioned with traditional political parties, including a significant proportion of young voters, capitalizing on issues such as national identity, sovereignty and cultural preservation. Looking forward, the impact of AUR and SOS Romania in shaping Romanian and European Union policies will depend on their ability to navigate internal cohesion challenges and establish meaningful (and stable) alliances within the EP.

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SLOVAKIA





# Slovakia: Mixed Results of Populist Parties in the 2024 EP Elections

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## Abstract

Since Slovakia's EU accession in 2004, populist parties have dominated national politics, although they are less influential in European Parliament (EP) elections. While Smer–Slovak Social Democracy won five national elections and Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OĽaNO) triumphed in 2020, populist parties performed weaker in EP elections. Progressive Slovakia (PS) won in 2019 and 2024, signalling different electoral dynamics. The rise of populism in Slovakia reflects a shared narrative of a virtuous people vs. a corrupt elite, although each party incorporates populism differently. Smer, led by Robert Fico, has shifted towards far-right nationalism, while OĽaNO evolved into Movement Slovakia (MS), with a focus on anti-corruption. The neo-Nazi Kotlebists (ĽSNS), initially successful, has splintered, losing its foothold in national politics. The 2024 EP elections, held amid an assassination attempt on Prime Minister Fico, reflected the political tensions. Smer placed second with 24.8%, while MS and ĽSNS underperformed. These results highlight the varied impact of populist parties on national and EU politics in Slovakia..

**Keywords:** *populism; Slovakia; European elections; Smer; Movement Slovakia*

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## Background

Since Slovakia's accession to the European Union (EU) in 2004, populist political parties have largely dominated the national political landscape. In countries with proportional electoral systems, electoral success is typically determined by the ability to form interparty alliances that command a majority in the national parliament. Nevertheless, in Slovakia, it has consistently been a populist party that has secured the largest share of parliamentary seats. Direction–Slovak Social Democracy (Smer) achieved this outcome in five elections, while the Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLaNO) – rebranded as ‘Movement Slovakia’ (MS) in late 2023 – emerged as the leading party in 2020. In five out of six cases, the victorious populist party also became the largest party controlling the government.

However, populist parties are notably less dominant in EP elections. While Smer emerged victorious in two EP elections (2009 and 2014), the now-defunct Slovak Democratic and Christian Union won the first EP elections in 2004, and Progressive Slovakia (PS) secured wins in both 2019 and 2024. These results demonstrate that the electoral dynamics in EP elections differ from those in national contests. The second-order status of EP elections contributes to this difference, with lower voter turnout and opposition parties effectively mobilizing voters against the incumbent government. However, mainstream opponents of populist parties tend to be more supportive of European integration, and their supporters are generally more motivated to express this stance at the ballot box, with consequences for the results of EP contests.

Populism is an elusive concept, often used not only to describe political phenomena but also as a value-laden term to discredit opponents. For the purposes of this briefing, I define ‘populist’ parties as those identified in the authoritative PopuList 3.0 database (<https://popu-list.org/applications/>). The latest edition identifies Smer, OLaNO (now MS), We Are Family (SR),<sup>1</sup> and Kotlebists – People’s Party Our Slovakia (ĽSNS) as the party-political embodiments of populism in Slovakia. The four parties differ in their ideologies, degree of popular support, stances on the European integration and many other important aspects. What they have in common is their depiction of society as being divided into two opposing groups: the virtuous people and the corrupt political elite, with the latter seen as betraying the interests of the former.

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1. The party failed to clear the 5% electoral threshold and did not enter the national parliament in 2023. It did not participate in the 2024 EP elections.



It is also worth mentioning that none of the populist parties analysed here has ‘populism’ as the sole defining characteristic feature. In fact, populism is understood as a thin ideology that can coexist with a host of other ideologies and may play only a secondary role in the party’s profile. Smer is a case in point. Established in the late 1990s as a left-leaning statist party, it has transformed into a far-right party. Smer managed to return to power in 2023 after three years in opposition, during which its popular support plummeted and its parliamentary caucus suffered a break-up, after which the Voice-Social Democracy (Hlas), led by the former prime minister, Peter Pellegrini, formed as a separate entity. Although Smer has always featured nationalist, Eurosceptic and illiberal standpoints, from 2021 onward, Fico focused on building alliances with ‘alternative media’, extra-parliamentary opposition and far-right groups. The COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine crisis fostered a critical public sentiment (such as anti-vaxxers and pro-Russian authoritarians) that was opposed to the government, which Fico effectively harnessed. By collaborating with far-right politicians and organizing joint anti-government rallies, he further strengthened the nationalist elements of Smer’s message (Haughton, Cutts and Rybář, 2024). Although nominally social democratic, Fico has effectively moved the party towards the illiberal far right.

In contrast, OĽaNO (now Movement Slovakia) began as an openly populist party, positioning itself as the voice of ‘the ordinary people’ against a self-serving and corrupt political establishment. Since it entered the national parliament in 2010, the party has centred its political agenda on anti-corruption rhetoric. Initially a loose coalition of anti-corruption and pro-life activists, it evolved into a Christian conservative populist movement with a fluid organizational structure centred around its leader and founder, Igor Matovič. In a surprising outcome, the party won the 2020 national elections, capitalizing on the disillusionment of voters drawn to its sharp criticism of corruption and clientelism associated with the Smer-led government. Following its electoral success, the party managed to form a four-party coalition government, with Matovič assuming the role of prime minister. However, the new government, composed of mostly inexperienced ministers, encountered significant governance challenges, including managing the global COVID-19 pandemic and responding to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Matovič’s unpredictable governing style, characterized more by performance and sensationalism than well-considered policymaking, further exacerbated the government’s declining popularity. His approach led to numerous personal conflicts, not only with the opposition but also with his coalition partners. After one year, Matovič swapped positions with Finance Minister Eduard Heger, becoming the new Finance Minister



himself. However, this move eventually failed to prevent the withdrawal of support from one of the coalition partners, resulting in a successful vote of no confidence in parliament. Consequently, the OĽaNO-led cabinet was replaced by a caretaker government appointed by President Zuzana Čaputová to lead the country toward early elections in September 2023.

Finally, the Kotlebists (ĽSNS) started as an extreme-right party that has used anti-establishment populist appeals combined with radical nativist ideology from its inception. The party managed to enter the Slovak parliament in 2020 and the EP a year earlier. However, the party caucus broke up in 2021, and the breakaway faction established a new party called Republika (Republic). It elected MEP Milan Uhrík as the party leader and distanced itself from what they portrayed as increasingly autocratic practices of the ĽSNS leader Marian Kotleba. Since then, popular support for ĽSNS has sharply declined; most former voters of the party turned to Republika, as did other far-right supporters, leaving ĽSNS out of the national parliament in 2023.

## The political context of the 2024 EP elections

The campaign and the results of the EP elections in Slovakia in 2024 were significantly shaped by two factors. Firstly, the elections took place just weeks after the direct presidential elections (held at the turn of March and April 2024) and several months after the national parliamentary elections of September 2023. Because of their temporal proximity, all three electoral contests were related. Secondly, the elections were organized in the shadow of the assassination attempt on Prime Minister Robert Fico of Smer that took place in May 2024. The assassination attempt shook the country and impacted the campaign and elections both directly and indirectly.

In the national parliamentary elections of September 2023, Smer emerged as the leading party, securing a plurality with 22.9% of the votes. The party formed a coalition government with Hlas, a splinter faction from Smer, and the Slovak National Party (SNS), which managed to re-enter the national parliament after being absent in the previous electoral cycle, with Robert Fico appointed as prime minister. The socially liberal PS finished second, securing 18% of the vote. During post-election negotiations, PS made an unsuccessful attempt to dissuade Hlas from aligning with Smer, offering its leader Peter Pellegrini the position of prime minister in exchange for joining a government with other opposition parties. However, Smer

provided a more favourable offer: Hlas would receive an equal number of ministries as the significantly larger Smer, and Pellegrini would gain Smer's backing for his bid in the directly elected presidential race. As a result, the presidential election effectively became a second round in the contest for control over national institutions.

The former governing parties faced a devastating defeat: two failed to secure any parliamentary seats, while OĽaNO, led by former prime minister Igor Matovič, saw its vote share diminish to less than one-third of its 2020 result. Only Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), an economically liberal junior coalition partner of OĽaNO, maintained its performance from 2020. Additionally, the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) succeeded in winning parliamentary seats for the first time since 2012.

Shortly after its formation, the new government embarked on a political course that, in many respects, starkly contrasted with that of the 2020–2023 administrations. The official Government Program included, among other things, plans to dismantle the national public broadcaster RTVS, abolish the Special Prosecution Office responsible for investigating the most serious criminal cases (including high-profile corruption cases), and overhaul the penal code, which would directly affect dozens of ongoing investigations. It also suggested preparing a special law targeting 'foreign agents', namely non-governmental organizations receiving grants from international donors.

Internationally, the new government pledged to halt all military assistance to Ukraine in its defence against Russian aggression and adopt a more neutral stance toward Russia. Significantly, many of these changes were set to be implemented not only without consultations with relevant stakeholders but also by using a special legislative procedure to fast-track the measures through parliament in a very short timeframe. The opposition criticized these plans and legislative proposals, arguing that they would obstruct the investigation and prosecution of corruption cases during the previous Smer-led administration. Furthermore, some measures appeared to enable the new government to bypass existing legislative safeguards and take control of independent public bodies.

In an effort to counter these legislative moves by the new parliamentary majority, opposition parties appealed to the European Commission and their partners in the EP to urge the Slovak government to reconsider its plans. However, the government made few changes and instead accused the opposition of damaging the country's reputation internationally. Consequently, the period following the parliamentary and presidential elections was marked by intense confrontation between the governing parties and the parliamentary opposition.



Although the opposition-backed independent candidate won the first round of the presidential elections, Pellegrini ultimately prevailed in the runoff and was elected president. His victory had two significant consequences for the dynamics of interparty competition. First, since Slovak presidents traditionally renounce their party membership and strive to maintain a non-partisan role, Pellegrini's departure as its founder and most trusted representative weakened the Hlas party. Second, it provided additional impetus for the opposition, particularly PS, to mobilize its supporters in the EP elections with the slogan 'they cannot have everything', a reference to the governing parties. Boosting its electoral prospects, PS 'recruited' Ľudovít Ódor, the former prime minister of the 2024 caretaker government and former Vice-Governor of the Central Bank, to lead its party list in the EP elections.

## Assassination attempt on Robert Fico and the campaign

Just before the most intense phase of the campaign was set to begin, the trajectory of domestic politics was dramatically altered by a failed assassination attempt on Prime Minister Robert Fico. On 15 May, while Fico was addressing a crowd of his supporters in the small town of Handlová, a 71-year-old man fired five shots at him, four of which struck Fico, causing gunshot wounds to his abdomen. Shortly afterwards, several leading representatives of Smer and SNS blamed the opposition and independent media for the attempt, claiming it resulted from a polarized political environment they allegedly created. They further suggested that unspecified measures were necessary to increase government control over the media and regulate the right of assembly to enhance public safety. While there were moderate voices within the government advocating for de-escalation, the coalition parties' primary message was to blame their political opponents. Although the assassin had no record of links to any political party, some government representatives attempted to associate him with PS, alleging he had attended opposition rallies in the months preceding the attack.

In response to the assassination attempt, PS and other opposition parties suspended their election campaigns and proposed a meeting of the highest representatives of all parliamentary parties, but the governing parties rejected this proposal. Similarly, President Čaputová and President-elect Pellegrini jointly suggested a national roundtable involving all major parties, but some government representatives also rejected this initiative.

Whatever campaign strategy Smer had prepared for the EP election was eventually reduced to two slogans: ‘For Peace in Europe’ and ‘For Robert Fico’. The party sought to promote the narrative that the previous government had falsely criminalized Fico and his associates, and upon Smer’s return to power, justice needed to be restored. Furthermore, Smer conveyed to its voters the message it had promoted in the 2023 national campaign: peace in Europe is endangered because previous governments (and the EU) supplied weapons to Ukraine. According to Smer, Slovakia should remain neutral, and such neutrality would restore peace. The Smer manifesto stated: ‘We want to be the extended arm of Robert Fico’s government, which will face increasing attacks from Brussels’ warmongers for striving for peace and refusing to send weapons to Ukraine’ (Smer 2024). Additionally, Smer attacked what it called ‘extreme progressive gender ideologies’ and sought to associate them with PS. Following the assassination attempt, Smer leaders and candidates attempted to rhetorically link ‘progressivism’ with ‘extremism’ to discredit their primary opponent.

Although PS, along with other opposition parties, initially suspended its campaign, it soon resumed its activities. The party sought to mobilize its supporters by arguing that the Smer-led government had undermined Slovakia’s position within the EU and that its policies could lead to Slovakia’s isolation or even result in the suspension of EU funds due to non-compliance with rule-of-law criteria. It also contended that achieving national reconciliation after the assassination attempt should not imply that the opposition would abandon its primary role of holding the government accountable for its actions and proposals.

## The main campaign issues and stances of populist parties

Smer, as the leading representative of party-based populism, produced a five-page manifesto summarizing its central positions concerning several crucial EU policies. It consistently promoted the key manifesto stances in public rallies, media interviews and on social networks. As mentioned, Smer blamed the EU for ‘prolonging war in Europe’ by supporting Ukraine. As in the past, the party questioned the rationale of sanctions against Russia and has been critical of the EU foreign policy against other authoritarian regimes by calling it ‘a patronizing approach’ and ‘the imposition of the European liberal model’ towards countries that ‘have the right to their own historical path’ (Smer 2024).





The party also rejected the recently adopted EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, particularly the scheme that includes the relocation of asylum seekers among the EU countries. It proposed no concrete measures but only generally stated that the EU external border should be protected more and that illegal migration should be dealt with in the country of origin. The opposition to compulsory relocation schemes has been central to the party's stance since the mid-2010s. Smer also claimed it would initiate reopening the European Green Deal, which was labelled as an 'extreme environmental initiative' and claimed it was pushed through by 'Eurocrats with no accountability'. It specifically rejected the target of reducing emissions by 55% by 2030 (Smer 2024).

Smer linked the EU's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic to control by supranational elites, particularly 'multinational corporations and pharmaceutical companies', leading to the 'imposition of experimental vaccinations' and the 'criminalization of people for their opinions' (Smer 2024). Since first gaining representation in the EP, Smer's Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) have been part of the leading Socialist group (Socialists & Democrats, S&D). However, in the previous parliament, their membership was suspended due to their alliance with the far-right Slovak National Party (SNS) (Euronews 2023). The examples above demonstrate that Smer itself has shifted towards the far right.

It is instructive to compare Smer's position with that of another populist party, the far-right neo-Nazi Kotlebists – People's Party Our Slovakia (ĽSNS). Although now electorally marginal, ĽSNS was represented in both the national (2016–2020) and European (2019–2024) parliaments. The party did not produce an official EP election manifesto in 2024 but instead promoted its views on various social media platforms.

The primary difference between the two populist parties in 2024 was their stance on Slovakia's EU membership. Smer claimed to support EU membership despite its many shortcomings. In contrast, ĽSNS argued that what it sees as the drawbacks of EU membership are inherent to how the EU operates and that the EU cannot be reformed. Consequently, it advocated for Slovakia's exit from the EU (ĽSNS 2024). The party leader stated that, if elected to the EP, ĽSNS would 'lay the groundwork for Slovakia's exit from the European Union and break the EU from within' (ĽSNS 2024).

However, the positions of Smer and ĽSNS were quite similar regarding their

assessment of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Green Deal and the COVID-19 pandemic. While their reasoning differed, their objectives overlapped:

ĽSNS opposed any military support for Ukraine, claiming it ran counter to efforts to achieve peace. It further argued that the ultimate goal of the EU was to escalate the conflict, with the final aim of full and open participation of European countries in the conflict (RTVS 2024). ĽSNS also blamed the West for the conflict, citing its overall unfair stance towards Russia and its legitimate interests.

Regarding their opposition to the Green Deal, Smer argued that it would harm Slovakia's automotive industry. In contrast, ĽSNS contended that the proposed measures were misguided: strict protection of water, soil and forests should occur at the national level. However, a clear nativist tone was evident in their proposed measures, suggesting that 'the fundamental solution was to prevent the purchase of land by foreigners' (Hlavný denník 2024).

Finally, ĽSNS's rejection of the EU's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic was similar to Smer's, but its reasoning was more extreme and conspiratorial. The party suggested that vaccination campaigns and deals with pharmaceutical companies were part of a broader plan to transform Europe. ĽSNS claimed that the EU was attempting to destroy the Christian tradition in Europe by promoting mandatory vaccinations that would prevent young Europeans from having their own children. This move, they argued, would align with the EU's alleged goal of 'replacing the original inhabitants of Europe with migrants brought in from all corners of the world' (ĽSNS 2024).

The positions of the third populist party, MS (formerly OĽaNO), differed most significantly from those of Smer and ĽSNS in the area of international politics. MS argued that the conflict in Ukraine was a result of Russia's imperial ambitions and that it was the duty of European democracies to help Ukraine defend itself. The party claimed that Ukraine was also fighting for 'our freedom and democracy' (Hnutie Slovensko 2024).

MS was also critical of the Green Deal but proposed a revision that would involve postponing the timeline for key targets, arguing that 'reckless and hasty implementation of electromobility will lead to greater poverty and reduced mobility for vulnerable groups' (Hnutie Slovensko 2024). The party's positions on other contentious issues, such as immigration and the COVID-19 pandemic, were



vaguer. Instead, its manifesto prioritized the need to combat disinformation and corruption at the EU level in an attempt to link its opponent, Smer, to these issues.

## The results and implications of the EP elections

The elections were held on a single day, 8 June and their results were remarkable in several respects. The turnout of 34.4%, although the fourth lowest among all EU countries, was the highest ever recorded in EP elections in Slovakia, an increase of nearly 12 percentage points compared to 2019. Of the three populist parties, only Smer managed to gain parliamentary representation, finishing a close second after PS with 24.8% of the vote, thereby expanding its EP representation from three to five MEPs. The other two populist parties failed to cross the 5% threshold, receiving just 2% (MS) and 0.5% (LSNS), respectively.

In the absence of exit polls or other opinion data, it is difficult to determine the factors that led to these results. As discussed, the outcomes were decisively influenced by the fact that this was the third nationwide electoral contest within nine months and by the assassination attempt on Robert Fico, the leader of Smer. The two electoral defeats of the parliamentary opposition and the polarizing effects of these losses likely bolstered support for PS, whose electoral base is strongly aligned with Slovakia's EU membership (Haughton et al., 2024). The assassination attempt likely increased sympathy for Fico and his party, prompting some voters of non-parliamentary opposition parties (other than Smer) to support Smer in the EP elections. Smer's two coalition partners performed poorly, with SNS failing to gain any seats despite its party list featuring all major figures, including the party leader. Since a sizeable share of their supporters view Fico favourably, they likely voted for Smer (Hopková 2024). In contrast, LSNS was electorally weakened by the departure of Republika, its breakaway faction, which performed well in the EP elections. Finally, Movement Slovakia's low support probably reflected disappointment with its performance in the 2020–2023 government.

The election results put the Slovak government in an awkward position, as none of its six MEPs (five from Smer and one from Hlas) are likely to sit in a major faction in the EP. In contrast, the parliamentary opposition parties will join the Renew (six from PS) and European People's Party (EPP) (one from KDH) groups in the EP. This constellation is likely to further alienate the Slovak government from its European partners.

Table 1: Results of the most recent national and EP elections

Party	EP 2019 (%)	EP 2019 (seats)	NR SR 2023 (%)	EP 2024 (%)	EP 2024 (seats)
<b>PS</b>	20.1	4	17.96	27.8	6
<b>Smer</b>	15.7	3	22.94	24.76	5
<b>Republika</b>	-	-	4.75	12.53	2
<b>Hlas</b>	-	-	14.7	7.18	1
<b>KDH</b>	9.7	2	6.82	7.14	1
<b>ĽSNS</b>	12.1	2	0.84	0.48	0
<b>SaS</b>	9.6	2	6.32	4.92	0
<b>MS (OĽaNO)</b>	5.3	1	8.89	1.98	0
<b>SNS</b>	4.1	0	5.62	1.9	0

Source: www.statistics.sk. Electoral threshold of 5% applies for a single party in both types of elections. All parliamentary parties represented in at least one parliament are listed

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SLOVENIA





# Digital Strategies of Political Parties in the 2024 European Elections: The Case of Slovenia

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## Abstract

This report offers a systematic analysis of Slovenian political parties in online campaigning during the 2024 EP elections. It draws on a dataset of political parties and their online representations, selected from official party websites and dominant social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram and TikTok, in May 2024. The results show that Slovenian parties' communication during the 2024 EP campaign was quite self-referential, accompanied by images of the candidates, indicating a high degree of personalization of politics. Moreover, the results show the "non-European orientation" of the campaign, as domestic issues dominated the parties' social media profiles and websites. Furthermore, the content analysis of the parties' websites revealed five issues where some cross-party differences in attitudes were observed: 1) agreement in party attitudes towards the environment; 2) on Ukraine and Palestine, parties on the right took different positions; 3) the centre-left coalition supported the government's domestic policy the most; 4) right-wing actors tended to frame migration and minority rights in a restrictive way; actors with a left-wing orientation took a more humanitarian approach; and 5) left-wing actors were most tolerant vis-à-vis gender and reproductive rights. The results, therefore, imply a clear distinction between Slovenian parties of the left and right during the 2024 EP campaign.

**Keywords:** *Social media, political communication, data-driven campaign, political parties, EU elections*

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## Introduction

Many studies over the last two decades have confirmed how the internet and social media have changed the conditions of political communication (Blumer and Kavanaugh 1999). Some argue that media changes are radically shaping the conditions of political communication (Chadwick, 2023; Kreiss, 2023). Chadwick (2023: 21) argues that a hybrid media system is a more fluid and contested space than previous mass media systems. These shifts are evident during election campaigns, which are characterized by computational politics (Tufekci, 2014).

The data collected during the formal campaign for the 2024 European elections describe the primary digital strategy of Slovenian political parties and a brief comparison of the selected strategies during the EP campaign. The question is, therefore, how candidates and their parties present themselves in these digital presentations, how they address their potential voters, what messages they use to occupy the digital channels they manage, and with what degree of communicative responsibility they engage with citizens.

First, we analysed their landing pages to identify ideological identifiers and several other issues that could indicate the national or European orientation of the parties. We then focused on identifying the main issues included in their campaign as potential indicators of a propensity towards populism and the attitudes of the observed parties towards selected public issues such as climate change, rights of the LGBTQ+ community, human rights of migrants and other minorities, national government policies, violence against women, abortion and reproductive rights, and gender and sexual identity. In addition to these “identity policy orientations”, we also looked at the extent to which each party focused on the wars in Ukraine and Palestine. The main findings are placed in the context of the critical role of social media in so-called data-driven campaigning (Chadwick and Stromer-Galley, 2016).

## Research design, methods and sample

The analysis of the online presence of Slovenian political actors has a long history (see Oblak, 2003; Oblak and Željan, 2007; Oblak and Ošljak, 2013; Oblak, 2017). For this report, we have chosen a quantitative approach with mainly descriptive aims regarding the communicative characteristics of the selected political actors within a case study: the 2024 European elections. The data were collected using the content analysis method: an extended set of variables was constructed, in which we revised the

instrument used in the Digital Citizenship project (see Oblak, 2016). The data, which was collected on the websites of political parties and social media profiles, allowed for the relatively easy identification of several pieces of information. The data collection was part of the assignments within the undergraduate course on Politics and Digital Culture at the University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Sciences.

We have analysed the websites of the six Slovenian parties that officially entered the 2024 European elections: three of them – Gibanje svoboda (GS), Levica (LP), and Socialni demokrati (SD) – belong to the ruling coalition government, while Nova slovenija (NS) and Slovenska demokratska stranka (SDS) were political parties in opposition. Thus, the majority of analysed parties were campaigning as Slovenian parliamentary parties. In addition, we analysed the online presence of Vesna–zelena stranka (green party), which competed as a nonparliamentary party. Regarding their associations with political groups in the European Parliament, 38% belong to the European People’s Party (EPP), 15% to the Socialists and Democrats (S&D), another 15% to the liberal Renew Europe and 15% to the Left.

Table 1: Results of the 2024 EP elections in Slovenia

National political parties	Vote share (%)
[Right] SDS-Slovenska demokratska stranka	30.59
[Centre] Svoboda!-Gibanje svoboda (GS)	22.11
[Centre] Vesna-Vesna-zelena stranka (green party)	10.53
[Left] SD-Socialni demokrati	7.76
[Right] N.Si-Nova slovenija - Krščanski demokrati (NS)	7.68
SLS-Slovenska ljudska stranka	7.21
[Left] Levica-Stranka levica (LP)	4.81
Resni.ca-Državljsko gibanje Resni.ca	3.97
DeSUS-DD-Coalition DeSUS-DD (Demokratska stranka upokojevcv Slovenije, Dobra država)	2.22
ZS-Zeleni slovenije	1.61
Druge stranke-Druge stranke	1.52
Total	100

Source: European Parliament (2024).

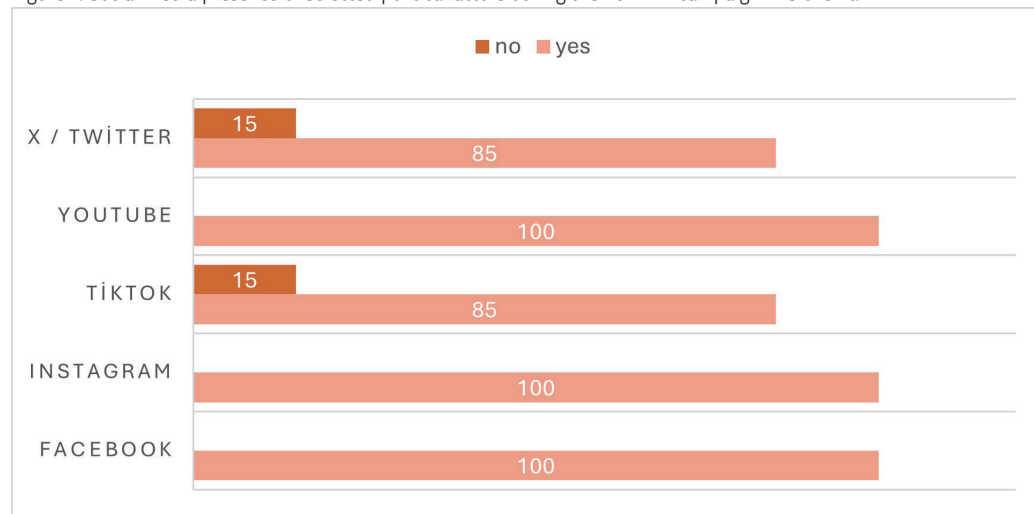
## Political actors’ online presence during the EP election campaign

According to preliminary data, our analysis of the online presence of parliamentary parties and selected nonparliamentary candidates for the European elections (e.g., Vesna) shows that all actors were present on Facebook, Instagram and YouTube,



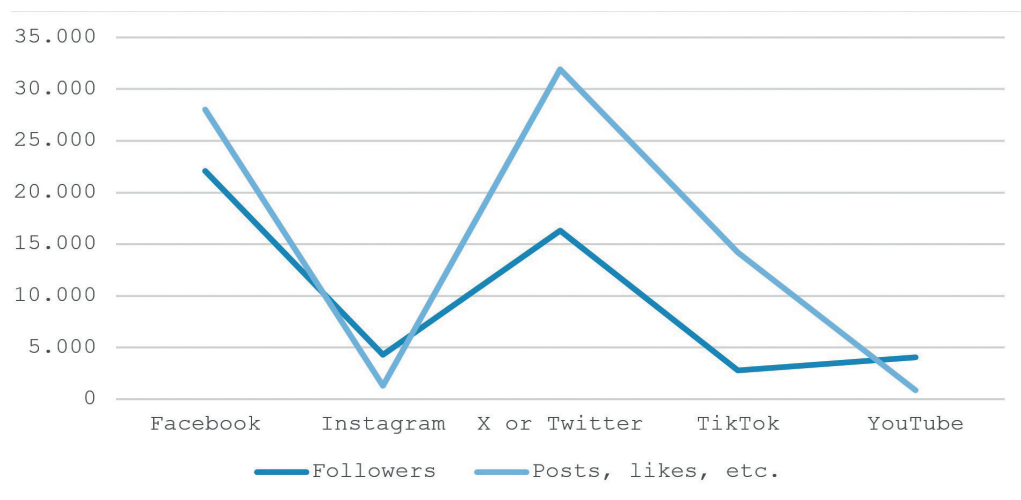
while some of them also promoted themselves on X/Twitter and TikTok (see figure 1). However, their activity and visibility on these networks varied considerably. For example, on average, the number of followers or subscribers to the most present social media was highest on X, followed by Facebook and TikTok (see figure 2).

Figure 1: Social media presence of selected political actors during the 2024 EP campaign in Slovenia



Source: Compiled by the authors based on original data collected as part of Project P5-0136 (<https://www.fdv.uni-lj.si/en/research/institute-of-social-science/national-research-projects/P7516>)

Figure 2: Average number of followers or subscribers vs. frequency of posts of selected political actors on selected social media platforms

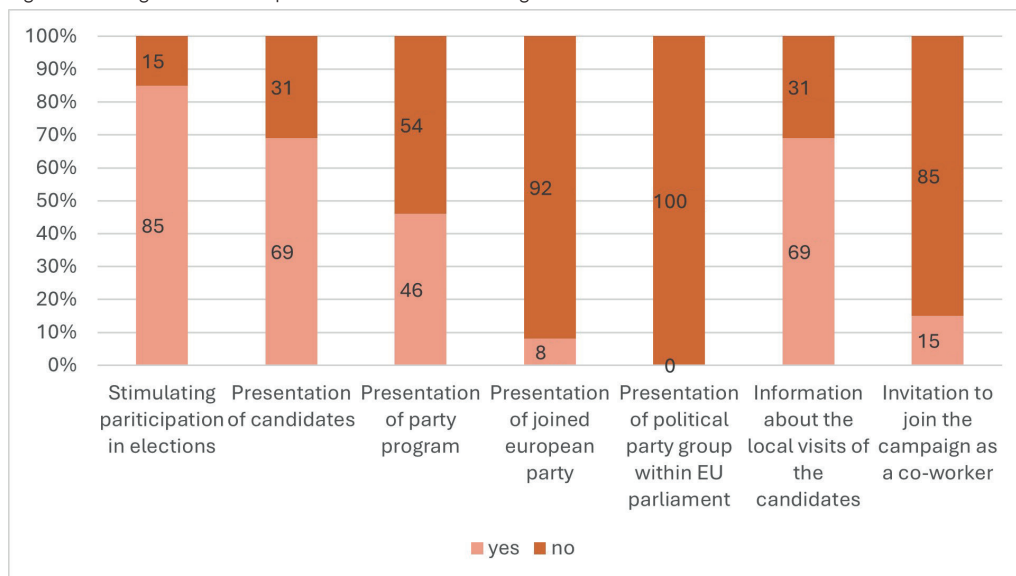


Source: Compiled by the authors based on original data collected as part of Project P5-0136 (<https://www.fdv.uni-lj.si/en/research/institute-of-social-science/national-research-projects/P7516>)

However, the online political landscape during the 2024 EP election campaign was more diverse in terms of the forms of participation on social media and the thematic focuses they gave their attention to. The data shows (see figure 3) that while direct invitations to vote dominated, immediately afterwards, the focus shifted to candidate presentations and information about their visits “on the ground”. This

trend is a long-standing one in conventional digital campaigns, and it would be hard to call the 2024 campaign an outlier. It is also evident that Slovenian political parties were not very well placed in the European context, nor did they provide information on which EP group they belong to and with whom they are aligned.

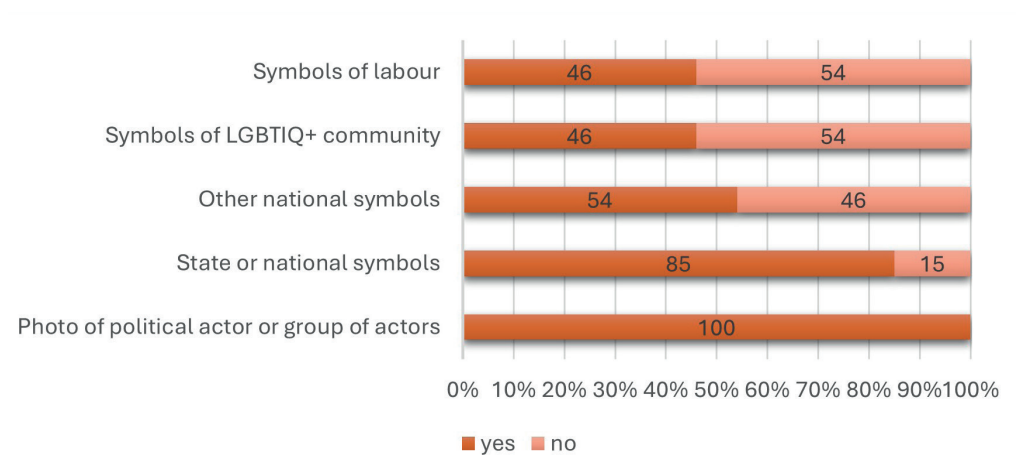
Figure 3: Strategies of selected political actors for stimulating election turnout



Source: Compiled by the authors based on original data collected as part of Project P5-0136 (<https://www.fdv.uni-lj.si/en/research/institute-of-social-science/national-research-projects/P7516>)

Such “self-referential coverage”, regularly accompanied by photos and videos of the candidates, is another familiar step towards a strong personalization of politics, which is at the same time distinctly local and pragmatic: rather than a concrete commitment to something, the focus is mainly on a specific political figure and his or her activities. As a result, we looked at what kind of symbols are most present in social media profiles, especially to see if there is a common logic in such election campaigns (see figure 4).

Figure 4: Type of symbols available on social media platforms (in %)



Source: Compiled by the authors based on original data collected as part of Project P5-0136 (<https://www.fdv.uni-lj.si/en/research/institute-of-social-science/national-research-projects/P7516>)



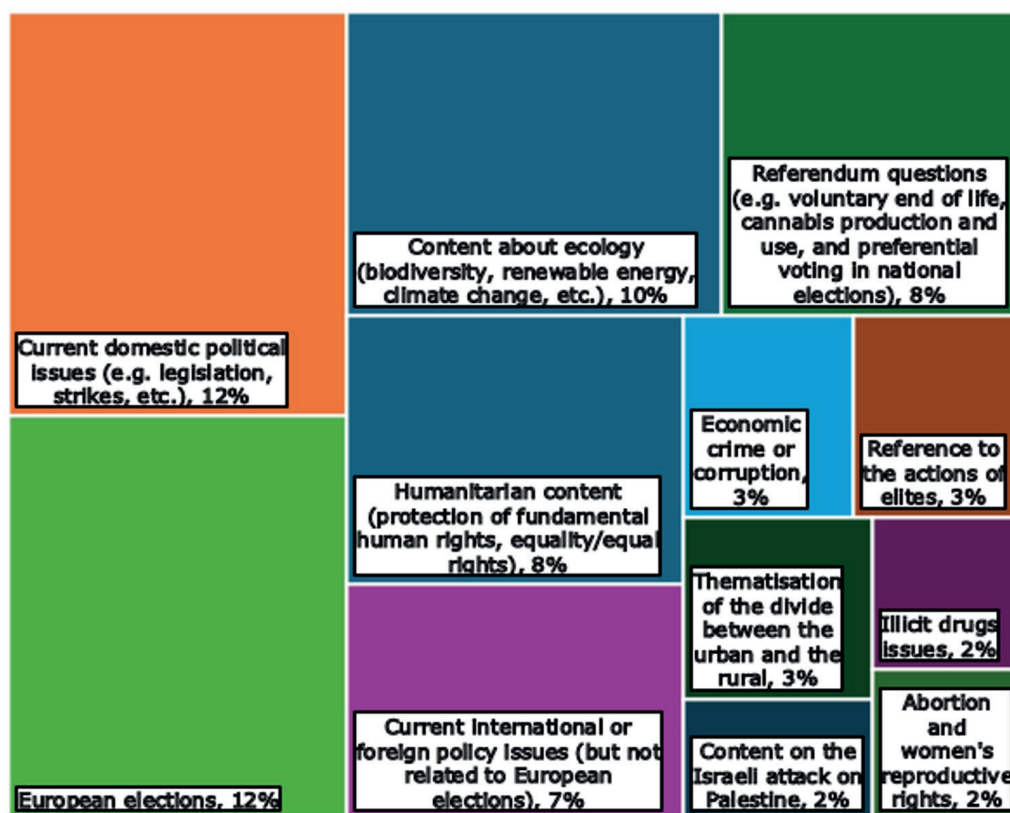


## The main topics and political parties' attitudes towards political issues

The data suggest that the “non-European orientation” of the campaign was at least partly reflected in attitudes to pressing issues: the parties’ social media profiles and websites were dominated by domestic issues, followed by ecology and climate change; there was also a strong presence of referendum issues and issues related to women’s reproductive rights (see figure 5).

In order to explore the attitudes of Slovenian political parties in their campaigns for the 2024 EP elections, the websites of the six political parties were also monitored. We were interested in whether and how they positioned themselves on the nine selected issues, which we used as indicators of potential biases. We also observed and coded cases where a particular issue was not present on the website.

Figure 5: Content published on party websites during the 2024 EP election campaign



Source: Compiled by the authors based on original data collected as part of Project P5-0136 (<https://www.fdv.uni-lj.si/en/research/institute-of-social-science/national-research-projects/P7516>)

In the analysis, the six campaigning parties were paired into three general categories of the political spectrum: 1) the right (Nova Slovenija and Slovenska demokratska stranka), 2) the centre (Gibanje Svoboda and Vesna–zelena stranka)

and 3) the left (Levica and Socialni demokrati). In cases where the attitudes of two parties from the same part of the political spectrum were coded in different categories, both categories were marked (see table 2).

Table 2: Attitudes of Slovenian political parties towards the political issues

1) Ecology. When the topic of ecology or climate change appears on the website, how is it addressed?				
Parties	Denial	Neutral	Awareness	Not present
Right	+		+	
Centre			+	
Left			+	
2) Ukraine. When the topic of the war in Ukraine comes up on the website, how is it handled?				
Parties	Pro-Russia	Neutral	Pro-Ukraine	Not present
Right			+	+
Centre			+	+
Left			+	+
3) Palestine. When the topic of Palestine appears on the website, how is it addressed?				
Parties	War, genocide	Neutral	Israeli defence	Not present
Right			+	
Centre	+			+
Left	+			
4) Government. When the government of the Republic of Slovenia topic appears on the website, how is it treated?				
Parties	Critically	Neutral	Supportively	Not present
Right	+			
Centre			+	+
Left			+	
5) Human rights. When the topic of human rights (i.e., minorities or migrants) is raised on the website, how is it addressed?				
Parties	Restrictive	Neutral	Supportive	Not present
Right	+			
Centre			+	
Left			+	+
6) Abortion. When the topic of abortion rights or reproductive rights is raised on the website, how is it addressed?				
Parties	Against	Neutral	Pro	Not present
Right	+			
Centre			+	
Left			+	
7) Violence against women. When the topic of violence against women appears on the website, how is it addressed?				
Parties	Not a problem	Neutral	As a problem	Not present
Right			+	+
Centre			+	+
Left			+	



8) LGBTQ+. When the topic of the LGBTQ+ community appears on the website, how is it addressed?				
Parties	Restrictive	Neutral	Supportive	Not present
Right	+			+
Centre			+	
Left			+	
9) Gender equality. When the topic of gender equality or gender identities is raised on the website, how is it addressed?				
Parties	Restrictive	Neutral	Supportive	Not present
Right	+			
Centre				+
Left			+	

Source: Compiled by the authors based on original data collected as part of Project P5-0136 (<https://www.fdv.uni-lj.si/en/research/institute-of-social-science/national-research-projects/P7516>)

What can such results tell us about the parties' attitudes to a selected set of public and political issues?

1. **Environmental issues:** According to the results, political actors seemed to be most united in their attitudes towards environmental crises or ecological issues. However, one of the actors from the right differed significantly in this respect, expressing the irrelevance of environmental problems.
2. **War and conflict:** Regarding the war in Ukraine, there is no dilemma that Slovenian political actors expressed pro-Ukrainian positions during the election campaign, or in this case, Russia was seen as the war aggressor. However, it is worth noting that the war in Ukraine was not an issue on 50% of the parties' websites during the same period. Although Palestine is also an armed conflict, the results suggest a different picture: right-wing parties raised the issue of Israel's right to self-defence. Left-wing parties, on the other hand, reported more on the war and genocide against the Palestinians.
3. **Domestic politics:** Given the centre-left government coalition, the attitude of the political parties towards the government's work is not surprising: the right-wing actors were critical, while the left and centre were supportive. The only exception was the Green Party Vesna, which is not part of the current coalition and did not comment on the government's work on its website during this election campaign.
4. **Human rights and minorities:** Human rights, especially in relation to minorities and migrants, were also a divisive issue for political parties during

the European election campaign in Slovenia. Right-wing actors framed the issue of migration and minority rights in more restrictive terms, while centre-left and left-wing parties adopted a more humanitarian approach in their reports.

- 5. Gender and reproductive rights:** The issue of gender and women's reproductive rights draws an even sharper line between the anti-abortion right and the rest: the political centre and the left defend women's right to decide about their bodies. A different picture emerges in the case of violence against women, which is addressed as a problem by actors across the political spectrum: here, one centre-right and one right-wing actor did not address the issue on their websites during the 2024 election campaign. However, positions on gender justice and (non-binary) gender identities shifted this logic again: The websites of the right-wing political actors were similarly restrictive, while the left explicitly supported gender equality; the political parties of the centre seemed to avoid such issues on their websites during the EU election campaign.

## Attitudes of young citizens towards the personalization of politics during the EP campaign

Based on the preliminary results of our datasets on the online presence of Slovenian political parties in the run-up to the 2024 European elections, we found a marked personalization of the campaign, where candidates' personal profiles can have a significantly higher reach than parties' profiles. We also found that parties often resort to populism, either based on the othering of minorities and foreigners and the division between 'us and them' or on the glorification of tolerance and inclusive discourse.

The analysis also shows a strong tendency for parties to use a more personalized campaign, where candidates' personal profiles can have a much wider reach than party profiles. Furthermore, reflecting on the analyses from the perspective of the students who collected the data as part of the course, their reflections were quite common: they strongly agreed that political parties do not adequately address them in the campaign. For example, they noted that the parties mainly appealed to young people to participate in the elections, while at the same time, there were very few young people on the lists of candidates, who were also mostly placed at the back of the queue.

Students also criticized the patronage of political parties that do not communicate transparently during election campaigns. They added that their publications were



not informative, their positions were not sufficiently argued, etc. Among the issues that were very important to young people but not well covered by the parties, students highlighted the war in Ukraine, the genocide in Palestine, human rights, migration and climate change.

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SPAIN



# Euroscepticism and Populism on Europhilic Soil: The 2024 European Parliament Elections in Spain

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## Abstract

This chapter deals with the association between radicalism, populism and Euroscepticism in the context of the 2024 European elections. It first examines the electoral platforms of leading political parties and shows that Eurosceptic ideas, while not highly prevalent, are more common among forces of the radical right. It also suggests that, as second-order theories expect, national issues dominated the electoral campaign for the European Parliament (EP) in Spain. Second, public opinion data is used to describe the general state of attitudes towards the EU and their association with voting for different political parties. The main results from this section are evidence that voters of radical-right parties are more critical of the EU. They also underline a potential reconfiguration of the radical-right space that now includes Vox and a new anti-establishment, outsider formation, The Party is Over (Se Acabó La Fiesta, SALF).

**Keywords:** *Euroscepticism; populism; radical-right; ideology; Spain*

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## Introduction

The 2024 European Parliament (EP) elections in Spain took place against a backdrop of political polarization and instability. The general elections in July 2023 resulted in a fragmented parliament, requiring the candidate from the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (Partido Socialista Obrero Español, PSOE), Pedro Sánchez, to secure the support of eight different parties and coalitions to be re-elected prime minister. The coalition supporting Sánchez, which included peripheral nationalist parties heavily criticized by right-wing forces, only intensified the existing trends of polarization (Parker, 2022). Political discussions often included accusations of lawfare, insults, and questioning of the government's legitimacy to a scale not seen before (Jones, 2024). It is no surprise that more than 75% of the population defined the political situation as 'bad' or 'very bad', according to data gathered in June 2024 by the Spanish Centre of Sociological Research (CIS) (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2024c).

The number and relevance of ongoing national-level political issues often sidelined European ones during the 2024 campaign. Topics recurrently discussed included the amnesty law applied to events referring to the independentist movement in Catalonia between 2012 and 2023, alleged corruption scandals around Sánchez and the PSOE, and international issues not directly related to the European Union (EU), such as Spain's recognition of the Palestinian State and a diplomatic incident with the Argentinian president Javier Milei. Analysts widely agreed that the electoral campaign was framed as a referendum against Sánchez by the right-wing Partido Popular (PP) and far-right Vox (Kennedy & Cutts, 2024). Still, European issues appeared during the campaign, and special attention was given to the potential success of the radical right and its influence on EP alliances. Relevant in this regard was the emergence of a new anti-establishment, outsider formation in Spain, The Party is Over (Se Acabó La Fiesta, SALF), led by the former political adviser and alt-right influencer Luís Pérez (known as Alvisé Pérez). The Spanish party system, once depicted as immune to the radical right (Alonso & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015), included two genuinely radical-right contenders for the EP elections in 2024.

Building upon this background, this chapter focuses on the association between Euro-scepticism, radicalism and populism before and during the European elections campaign in Spain. For that, it uses secondary sources and public opinion data from the CIS (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2024b; 2024c). The main

results suggest that Euroscepticism was comparatively low in Spain both on the demand and supply side, although it was stronger among radical-right parties and their supporters (see Llamazares & Gramacho, 2007). They also evidence a potential re-composition of the radical-right space with the competition between Vox and SALF, the latter with a more heterogenous voter profile regarding self-positioning on the left–right scale and an even stronger impugning discourse towards mainstream politics.

## Euroscepticism and populism in Spain

Spain is depicted as a Europhilic country. Citizens and parties had always had positive perceptions of the EU until 2008 (Powell, 2003; Real-Dato & Sojka, 2020; Vázquez García et al., 2010), and widespread critical positions among the public disappeared with the more negative consequences of the crisis (Gubbala, 2023). In April 2024, the CIS gathered data on attitudes towards the EU (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2024a). This report showed that Spaniards acknowledged the importance of the EU (more than 82% of the respondents thought that EU decisions matter a lot or quite a lot for the life of the Spaniards) and considered that EU membership had been more positive than not for salaries, employment opportunities, culture, development of less developed regions, business opportunities, and the relevance of Spain in world affairs (this was not the case only for one item, the price of consumption goods). In fact, large majorities supported strengthening EU common foreign policy, creating a European army, having a common policy of migration and asylum, harmonizing taxes, having a common policy of rights and obligations, and economically contributing to creating a European welfare state (Table 1).

Table 1. Percentage of respondents in favour or against key EU policies and actions

	In favour %	Against %
<b>Strengthen European common foreign policy</b>	83.3	13.4
<b>Creating a European army</b>	63.5	32.7
<b>Having a European common policy of migration and asylum</b>	78.1	19.2
<b>Harmonizing taxes</b>	62.9	29
<b>Having a common policy of rights and obligations</b>	87.1	9.9
<b>Economically contribute to creating a European welfare state</b>	80.7	16.5

Source: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (2024a)





Nevertheless, post-2008 outcomes included a comparatively more Eurocritical party system with the emergence of Podemos and especially Vox. While Podemos mostly targeted neoliberal policies at the EU level, Vox included more explicit references against the EU as a supranational organization, which could have attracted voters who oppose the European integration process (Marcos-Marne, 2023). Data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) confirm that both PSOE and PP had a favourable/strongly favourable position towards EU integration, Podemos had an opinion between neutral and somewhat positive, and Vox had a somewhat opposed one. The most critical party in Spain, Vox, still ranks higher in EU support than other parties of the radical-right family, such as the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV), the French Rassemblement National (RN), or the German Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) (Hooghe et al., 2024). The position of the recently created SALF remains unclear because the candidature did not present a structured manifesto for the EP elections. Still, the strongly nationalist and anti-establishment discourse of its leader anticipates a critical discourse towards the EU that might take different forms and intensities.

Considering that both Euroscepticism and populism are often found at the extremes of the ideological spectrum (Hooghe et al., 2002; Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2015), it is no surprise that Podemos and Vox have been more frequently studied regarding populism. According to the ideational approach, populism is found in the intersection between anti-elitism, people-centrism, and a Manichean understanding of politics (Hawkins et al., 2019; Wuttke et al., 2020). Following this definition, Podemos has been said to display a more populist discourse than Vox (Marcos-Marne et al., 2020, 2024), but recent analyses signal a decline in the use of populist ideas by Podemos, which has turned more clearly to radical-left ones (Roch, 2024; Rojas-Andrés et al., 2023). As for Movimiento Sumar ('Unite Movement'),<sup>1</sup> evidence suggests it does not include populist ideas in its discourse (Thomassen, 2022). Regarding SALF, there is little doubt that anti-elitism, especially against parties of the left, is a fundamental part of its electoral platform, but the use of people-centred ideas is much less clear. At the moment of writing, SALF may be characterized as a far-right protest movement that expresses a demagogic/impugning discourse. It must be acknowledged, however, that there is space for SALF to incorporate populist ideas in a more consistent manner.

Overall, the electoral competition in 2024 Spain seemed better explained by

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1. Sumar first competed in coalition with Podemos in the 2023 general elections, and on its own for the 2024 EP elections (for further information, see Rodon & Rodríguez, 2023).

where parties sit in the economic, cultural and centre-periphery axes of competition. This does not mean that populist ideas were irrelevant during the electoral campaign, and it certainly does not preclude populism from again becoming a key component of the political competition in the future. However, it helps to understand that most of the electoral claims, including positioning towards the EU, correlated strongly with left–right positioning in the economic and cultural dimensions. For example, in the Spanish public television debate for the EP elections, Jorge Buxadé (Vox) was the politician who most clearly framed his intervention as an opposition between the interest of Brussels and the Spanish people. Candidates from Podemos and Sumar directed criticisms towards the EU due to its (non)response to the Israel attacks in Palestine but also emphasized the importance of a green and fair Europe that considers the welfare of its peoples. This clearly evidences the relevance of the thick ideology to which populist ideas attach when it comes to EU contestation (Masseti, 2021; Roch, 2020).

## The EP 2024 elections: Results, trajectories and electorates

The results of the EP elections in Spain (Table 2) resembled general trends at the European level. A movement towards the right was observed, with the PP being the most-voted force (34% of the valid votes) and parties defending radical-right platforms increasing their vote share (Vox and SALF received together almost 15% of the valid votes). Nevertheless, mainstream forces of the left and right retained most of the MEPs (PP and PSOE secured more than 64.2% of the valid votes and 42 out of Spain's 62 MEPs). In line with aggregate results, parties integrated into The Left group experienced a decline in electoral support, which can also be attributed to a series of public disputes between Sumar and Podemos.<sup>2</sup>

To put these results into perspective, Vox clearly improved its results from the 2019 EP elections (6.21%), but it lost significant support when compared with the 2023 general elections (12.4%). The emergence and success of SALF are likely to have contributed to this, as according to CIS data, more than 50% of its electorate had supported Vox in the past general elections. Podemos, which together with Izquierda Unida (IU) received 20% of the vote in 2016, only gained two seats in the EP (3.3% of the valid vote). The declining electoral trajectory of Podemos can

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2. Tensions reached its peak in December 2023 when Podemos left Sumar's parliamentary group and joined the Grupo Mixto.



only be explained by referring to multicausal explanations from punishment to internal divisions, organizational disputes, engagement with institutional power, and the recovery of both macroeconomic indicators and mainstream parties (crucially, PSOE).

Table 2. EP electoral results in Spain

Party or coalition	European family	Vote share (%)	Seats in the EP
<b>Partido Popular (PP)</b>	European People's Party (EPP)	34.2	22
<b>Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE)</b>	Socialists and Democrats (S&D)	30.2	20
<b>Vox</b>	European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR)	9.6	6
<b>Ahora Repúblicas</b>	Greens-European Free Alliance (EFA) / The Left	4.9	3
<b>Sumar</b>	Greens-European Free Alliance (EFA) / The Left	4.6	3
<b>Se Acabó La Fiesta (SALF)</b>	Other	4.6	3
<b>Podemos</b>	The Left	3.3	2
<b>Junts-UE</b>	Non-attached (NA)	2.5	1
<b>Coalición por una Europa Solidaria (CEUS)</b>	Renew Europe	1.6	1

Source: <https://results.elections.europa.eu/es/>

To explore the central ideological, attitudinal and sociodemographic differences between voters of different parties, I pay attention to voters of the two mainstream parties of the left and right (PSOE and PP) and the four statewide parties that can be clearly associated with the radical left (Podemos and Sumar) and right (Vox and SALF). This section has used CIS data, particularly the 2024 May barometer (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2024b) (N= 4,013) and the pre-electoral study conducted for the EP elections (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2024c) (N=6,434). The study conducted in May 2024 incorporates different questions that are important to understand the profile of voters, but it did not include voters of SALF.

Relevant differences can be seen in the positions of voters on key issues that affect the EU, such as climate change or the war in Ukraine and Palestina (Table 3). Podemos and Sumar voters were by far the most concerned about climate change, followed by PSOE voters. The percentage of voters of PP and Vox that were very concerned about climate change did not reach 20%, and it was the lowest for Vox, reflecting general associations between attitudes towards climate change and left–right ideology (McCright et al., 2016). Vox and Podemos voters were the least

concerned about the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These voters perceive the negative consequences of the war to a similar extent as the average population, but they seem less concerned for different reasons. On the one hand, Podemos voters declared higher levels of sympathy towards Russians. On the other hand, Vox voters declared comparatively lower levels of sympathy towards both Russians and Ukrainians.

Accordingly, it could be that more pronounced preferences for one side and indifference towards both contribute to explaining lower levels of concern about the conflict. In any case, this does not speak of a general perception towards international conflict. Podemos voters were also the most concerned about war in the Middle East region. Overall, voters of left-wing forces were clearly more concerned about war in Palestine than Ukraine. This was particularly visible among Podemos voters and can be explained by the association between left-wing ideologies/parties and the Palestinian people in Spain (Musuruana & Hermosa Aguilar, 2022).

Table 3. Percentage of different parties' voters very concerned about...

	<b>PSOE</b>	<b>PP</b>	<b>Vox</b>	<b>Sumar</b>	<b>Podemos</b>
<b>Climate change</b>	40.9%	19.9%	13.2%	59.7%	61.3%
<b>Russian invasion of Ukraine</b>	32%	26.2%	15.5%	26.6%	13.5%
<b>War in the Middle East</b>	41.6%	25.6%	17.9%	52.3%	53.3%

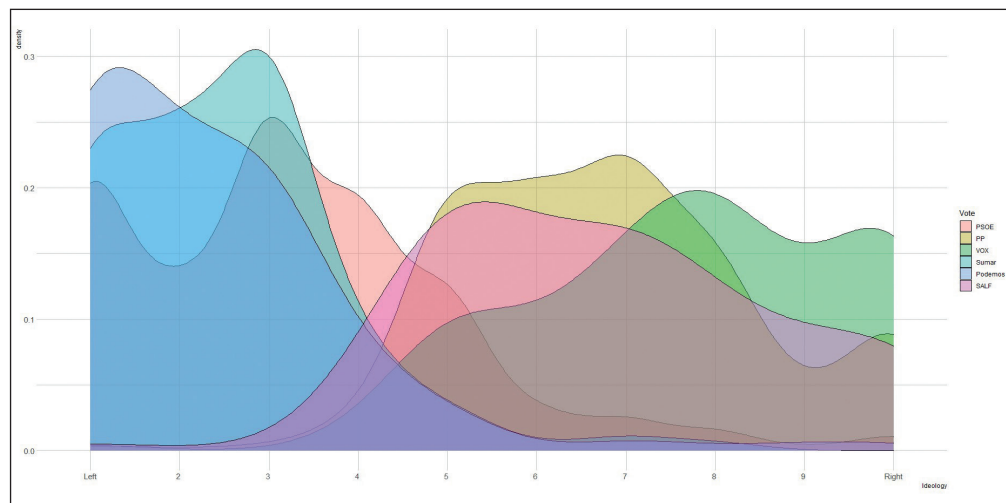
Source: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (2024b).

Moving to data from the pre-electoral study, Figure 1 shows relevant information regarding voters' positioning on the left–right scale. Unsurprisingly, voters of Podemos and Sumar were more clearly positioned to the extreme left of the scale. Voters of PSOE were more often situated to the centre-left of the scale, and PP voters were more to the right. Despite the transfer of votes and some attitudinal similarities between Vox and SALF voters, their ideological profiles seemed quite different. Vox voters self-identified with right and especially radical-right positions, but voters of SALF were more numerous at the centre-right of the ideological scale. This raises important questions about the extent to which the voters widely share the radical-right platform of Pérez or whether his electoral success is partially explained by the dynamics of protest voting that is more easily expressed in the European elections (Hix & Marsh, 2007).<sup>3</sup>

3. The first study conducted by CIS after the EP elections reflects that the estimated vote for SALF in a general election at around 1.5% (three times less than the percentage received in the EP elections).



Figure.1 Kernel density plot considering intention to vote and self-positioning in the left-right scale



Source: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (2024c).

Tables 4–6 below show the aggregated sociodemographic and attitudinal characteristics of the supporters of the most-voted parties. Vox and especially SALF had clearly masculinized electorates (only 21% of SALF voters were women), but the profile of their voters differed regarding catholic identification (more Catholics support Vox), level of studies (SALF gathered more support among people with higher education), economic features (SALF was comparatively more popular among employed people and performed the worst among those with the lowest income), and mean age (SALF voters were the youngest in the sample). Voters of SALF were those who more clearly defined themselves as ‘mostly Spanish’ and showed the lowest levels of identification with Europe. Similarly, voters of Vox also thought of themselves mostly as Spanish but showed a comparatively higher level of dual Spanish–European identity. The more cosmopolitan voters were those of Podemos and Sumar (Table 5). Results in Table 6 suggest that voters of Vox and SALF were also the most critical regarding the benefits of EU membership (PSOE voters were the most satisfied).

Table 4. Sociodemographic features in voters for main parties in the EP elections

	<b>PSOE</b>	<b>PP</b>	<b>Vox</b>	<b>Sumar</b>	<b>SALF</b>	<b>Podemos</b>
<b>Female</b>	55.9%	53.1%	39.4%	48.1%	21.3%	52.2%
<b>Catholic</b>	62.1%	80.1%	72.7%	12.2%	52.9%	14.2%
<b>Higher studies</b>	30%	35.1%	21.4%	49.8%	40.2%	39.3%
<b>Less than €1,100</b>	13.4%	12.5%	18.2%	9.8%	9.2%	10.6%
<b>Employed</b>	44.2%	53.2%	59.4%	66.8%	79.6%	57%
<b>Mean age</b>	55.8	55	42.9	47.5	36.9	49.2

Source: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (2024c).



Table 5. European identity among voters for main parties in the EP elections

	PSOE	PP	Vox	Sumar	SALF	Podemos
<b>Mostly European</b>	4.7%	2.5%	1.5%	7.4%	0.5%	7.3%
<b>Mostly Spanish</b>	18.2%	31.7%	56.6%	8.6%	64.9%	11.8%
<b>Both European and Spanish</b>	54.7%	55.9%	31.6%	39.6%	20.5%	21.2%
<b>Citizen of the world</b>	21.8%	9.6%	9.1%	43.5%	13.7%	54.7%

Source: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (2024c).

Table 6. Spain mostly benefited from or affected by EU membership

	PSOE	PP	Vox	Sumar	SALF	Podemos
<b>Mostly benefited</b>	87.8%	79.2%	43.5%	82.5%	33.3%	78.3%
<b>Mostly affected</b>	8.8%	15.9%	50.8%	12.5%	58%	18.4%

Source: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (2024c).

## Conclusion and implications

The results of the 2024 EP elections in Spain resembled larger trajectories unfolding at the EU level. Mainstream parties of the centre-left and right were still the most supported forces, but radical-right forces grew both in number and votes. These forces are characterized by more Eurosceptic discourses that also resonate more strongly with their voters. While populist ideas are sometimes present in their discourses, it is essentially the anti-elitist component of populism that they use more often, sometimes combined with demagoguery (especially visible in SALF). While there is no evidence to support a short-term electoral earthquake in Spain that would push forward radical-right forces, mainstream parties should reflect on the extent to which normalizing and incorporating discourses of the radical right complicates both their electoral performance and the project of the EU.

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SWEDEN



# A Speed Bump in the Road or the Start of an Uphill Journey? The Sweden Democrats and the 2024 European Parliament Election Setback

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## Abstract

Leading up to the 2024 European Parliament election, much attention was given to the anticipated gains of populist parties across Europe. While some populist parties made significant advances, the overall outcome was more moderate than expected. Sweden deviated from this general trend, witnessing gains for left-wing parties and a surprising setback for the populist radical right. The 2024 elections marked a historic decline for the Sweden Democrats, the first instance since their formation in 1988 that they regressed in comparison to previous national and European Parliament elections. This decline is particularly notable following their strong performance in the 2022 national elections, where they became Sweden's second-largest party. This article examines these developments, drawing on existing research, media reports and exit polls, with a focus on the Sweden Democrats' campaign strategies, election results and voter behaviour. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of these election outcomes for both Swedish domestic politics and the broader European political landscape.

**Keywords:** *radical right; populism; Sweden Democrats; European Union; elections, voting behaviour*

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## Introduction

The expectations for the European Parliament elections among parties to the right of the mainstream right were certainly high. Media forecasts were clear, proclaiming that ‘a populist wave surges’ (Vinocur, 2024) and ‘a far-right takeover of Europe is underway’ (Vohra, 2024). The question was not whether the disparate group of far-right parties would gain influence but how significant that influence would be. However, while the results must be seen as a success for these parties, it is probably more accurate to describe it as moderate rather than a landslide victory. While some parties – for example, the French National Rally, the Brothers of Italy and the Alternative for Germany – made significant gains, the development was more modest elsewhere.

Sweden was one country bucking the trend. Parties on the left made gains while parties on the right generally fared somewhat worse. Most surprisingly, it was a defeat for the populist radical right. The 2024 European Parliament election will go down in history as the first election ever where the Sweden Democrats regressed compared to the previous election. Until this point, the party was unique in the sense that in all national elections – both to the national and the European Parliament – since its formation in 1988, it had advanced compared to the previous election. The decline is even more remarkable given that the general expectation was for the party to continue its trend of success. Instead of repeating the achievement from the national parliamentary election in 2022, when it attracted more than 20% of the votes and became Sweden’s second-largest party for the first time, the party experienced a shock. On election night, it became clear that they were not only far behind the result of the 2022 national parliamentary election but also lost ground compared to the previous 2019 European election. Rather than continuing its surge, the party only managed to secure 13% of the votes, making them merely Sweden’s fourth-largest party.

Against this background, this chapter addresses party-political populism in Sweden in connection with the 2024 European Parliament election. Specifically, it describes and analyses the populist radical right Sweden Democrats, with a focus on the campaign, the results and voting behaviour. The article is based on previous research, media reports and exit polls.

## Populist parties in Sweden

In a European comparison, the successes of party-political populism came late to Sweden. Except for the brief presence of New Democracy in the Swedish Parliament

(the Riksdag) from 1991 to 1994, populist representation was absent until 2010, when the Sweden Democrats were first elected to the Riksdag.

Since then, the Sweden Democrats have monopolized the position of the populist party in Sweden. Although it has occasionally been claimed that the socialist Left Party is populist, a consensus has emerged that the Sweden Democrats is the only Swedish party that unequivocally meets the criteria (Meijers & Zaslove, 2021; Rooduijn et al., 2023). Some believed the newly launched People's List could become a new populist challenger. The movement, which adamantly rejected the designation of being a party, was founded just over a month prior to the election by a former Social Democratic MP known for winning a reality TV show and a sitting MEP from the Christian Democrats who had been removed from the party's list. With decent name recognition, the People's List initially received significant media attention. Interest quickly waned, and with only 0.6% of the votes, the People's List is destined to become a small footnote in Swedish party history. The initiators announced shortly after the election that they would not continue their involvement with the movement (Rogvall & Nordenskiöld, 2024).

As the only relevant populist party, this article thus focuses on the Sweden Democrats. The party was founded by outright racist groups with neo-Nazi links (Larsson & Ekman, 2001). Because of this history, the party was completely shut out from co-operation with other parties on the national stage for many years due to a cordon sanitaire. This began to change before the 2018 election and, more explicitly, before the 2022 parliamentary election, when three of the centre-right parties expressed a more open stance towards the Sweden Democrats (Bolin et al., 2023). Despite an election outcome in 2022 where these parties lost ground, they managed, with the support of the Sweden Democrats, to regain control of the government after eight years of Social Democratic-led rule. With 20.5% of the votes as the country's now second-largest party, the Sweden Democrats' support was crucial for the new government. The party was also rewarded through a far-reaching co-operation agreement. Many observers suggested that the Sweden Democrats had significant influence over the agreement (Aylott & Bolin, 2023). The 2024 European Parliament election was thus the first election in which the Sweden Democrats participated while having formal influence over the government, serving as a potential test of how voters viewed the party's collaboration with former adversaries from the establishment.

The party's political profile and priorities resemble those of other parties in the populist radical right family (e.g., Jungar & Jupskås, 2014). Its main priorities have



been a restrictive immigration policy and a tough stance on crime. Regarding the EU, the party long favoured exiting the EU. However, following the aftermath of Brexit and a surge in pro-EU attitudes among the electorate, the party moderated its criticism. Prior to the 2019 European Parliament election, the party dropped its demand for a referendum on EU withdrawal (Bolin, 2023a). Despite abandoning its hard Eurosceptic position, it remains the most EU-sceptical party in Sweden, possibly alongside the Left Party.

A key issue, similar to those faced by comparable parties in other EU countries, is the party's stance on Russia. Despite having taken a stance against Russia's invasion of Ukraine, other parties in Sweden have accused the Sweden Democrats of having an ambiguous attitude towards the Russian regime. Such attacks have not prevented the party from adopting, in turn, a critical stance towards several other similar parties, primarily within the Identity and Democracy (ID) group, precisely because they have shown a more openly friendly attitude towards the Putin regime (Bolin, 2023b).

The party succeeded in entering the European Parliament for the first time in 2014. One of the most decisive issues for the party has been how the Swedish public perceives its actions at the European level. This concern is particularly evident in the party's group affiliation in the European Parliament, as there are fears of being tainted domestically by association with other populist radical right parties with extreme pasts and reputations (McDonnell & Werner, 2018). After the 2014 election, the Sweden Democrats applied for membership in the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR) but were not accepted. Instead, it was admitted into the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD), which actively recruited MEPs from elsewhere after the Danish People's Party left to join the more mainstream ECR (Bolin, 2015). However, a few years later, resistance to the Sweden Democrats decreased somewhat, leading the party to join its Nordic neighbours, the Danish People's Party and the Finns Party, in the ECR just one year before the 2019 election (Johansson et al., 2024). Despite the Danish People's Party leaving the group to join ID a few years later, the Sweden Democrats remained in the ECR for the remainder of the parliamentary term.

## The election campaign

Over time, the Sweden Democrats have built up a highly effective communications department that has successfully attracted media and public attention. The

communication has often been controversial. In a TV advertisement ahead of the 2010 election, for example, the party illustrated the need for economic prioritization by showing a group of niqab-clad women with strollers racing against an elderly woman with a walker to reach the benefit payment first (Bolin et al., 2022). And in 2020, when party leader Jimmie Åkesson travelled to the border between Turkey and Greece, he distributed flyers with the text ‘Sweden is full’ (Fridolfsson & Elander, 2021).

The campaign strategy in the 2024 European Parliament election initially followed previous patterns. A year before the election, the party leadership proposed a ‘referendum lock’, a law stipulating that all major transfers of power and demands for larger payments to the EU must first be approved in a referendum (Åkesson & Weimers, 2024). This move was seen by many as a way to assert the party’s position as the most EU-sceptical. The campaign continued to be characterized by opposition to further transfers of power to the EU. However, the main focus was consistently related to immigration, often with connections to crime. The party invested heavily in the slogan ‘My Europe builds walls’, a paraphrase of the former Social Democratic Prime Minister Stefan Löfven’s statement during the 2015 refugee crisis that ‘My Europe does not build walls’. The message appeared on the party’s campaign posters and YouTube channel, where it was accompanied by various dramatic videos showing people with seemingly foreign backgrounds engaging in violent protests or otherwise behaving in a disturbing manner. The message was clear: immigration creates problems, so Sweden and Europe need to close their borders.

The campaign initially had the intended effect of creating media attention around the party. The election campaign soon took a new turn when, about a month before the election, it was revealed that the party’s communications department hosted a so-called troll factory, where anonymous social media accounts spread disinformation and derogatory portrayals of other politicians. The revelation was condemned unanimously by all other parties, including those in the government that the Sweden Democrats were co-operating with. The party responded with a strong counterattack through a five-minute ‘speech to the nation’ on YouTube, where Åkesson claimed that the reporting and the following reactions were ‘a massive domestic influence operation by the collective left–liberal establishment’ (Sverigedemokraterna, 2024). Given the Sweden Democrats’ conventional approach of handling troublesome revelations by downplaying or ignoring the accusations, many were surprised by Åkesson’s strong counterattack. After the election, reports also emerged of rare internal criticism regarding how the party leadership handled the situation. It is plausible that the party’s handling of the crisis also contributed



to some voters refraining from voting for the party.

Possibly facilitated by the party's increased confidence after being given formal influence for the first time, there were also tendencies to express certain controversial positions more openly than before. The party was, for example, once again criticized for its stance on Russia. This recurring discussion was reignited after Åkesson stated that there is an upper limit to how much support Sweden should give to Ukraine (Carlsson, 2024) and, perhaps even more so, after the party's top candidate, Charlie Weimers, suggested that their own party group, ECR, should be open to co-operating with parties in the ID group, whose stance on Russia has been characterized as relatively friendly (Nordenskiöld, 2024).

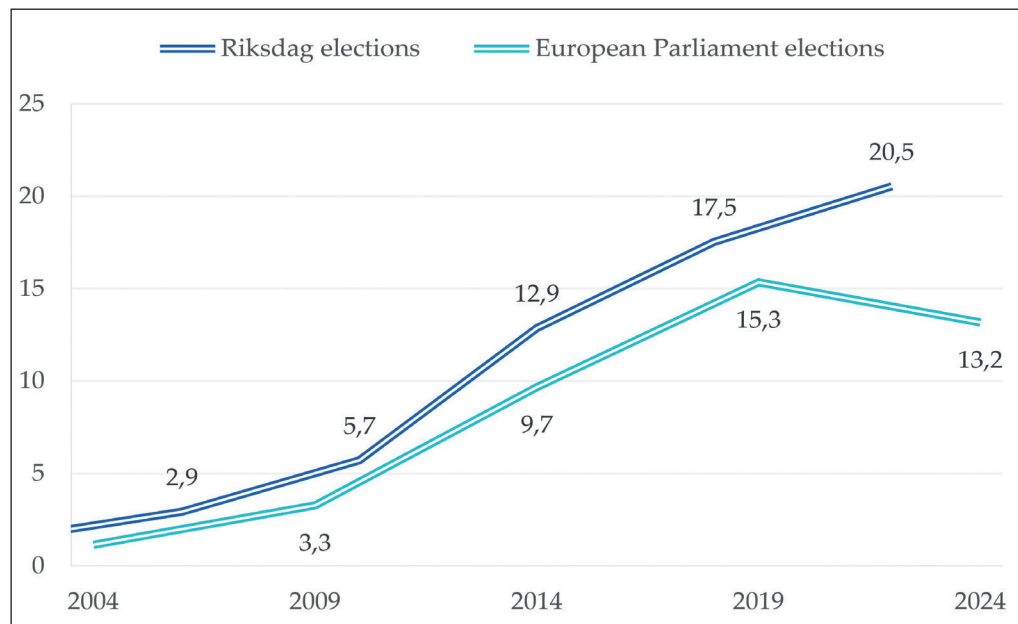
Åkesson also received criticism when, just days before the election, he claimed in an opinion piece that multiculturalism had led to a population replacement in Sweden (Åkesson, 2024). A reference akin to the well-known 'Great Replacement' theory within right-wing extremist and conspiratorial circles (Mudde, 2019), despite Åkesson himself having distanced himself from the concept just a year before the election.

## The 'demand side' of populism

Unlike many other populist radical right parties, the Sweden Democrats failed to make gains in the 2024 European Parliament elections. As illustrated in Figure 1, this is an exceptional occurrence since the party had never previously lost ground compared to a preceding national election. Despite securing 13.2% of the votes and retaining its three MEPs, the party experienced a decline of just over 2 percentage points compared to the 2019 election. The contrast with the 2022 national parliamentary election, the Riksdag, underscores the magnitude of this setback. The Sweden Democrats usually perform worse in the European Parliament elections than in the Riksdag elections. But even taking this into account, the result must be seen as a disappointment, especially since pre-election polls indicated a clear success for the party. Before the election, the question was whether the Sweden Democrats would succeed in becoming the country's second-largest party. The images broadcast from the party's election night event, when the exit poll results indicated that they had not only failed to surpass the Moderates but had also been overtaken by the Green Party, were almost of a party in shock.



Figure 1. Sweden Democrats' share of votes (%) in Riksdag and European Parliament elections (2004-2024)



Source: Compiled by the author based on data from the Swedish Election Authority

Turning to the question of who voted for the party based on the exit poll (SVT, 2024), no major surprises emerge. The sociodemographic patterns from previous elections reappear. While 18% of men voted for the Sweden Democrats, only 9% of women did so—at the voter level, the Sweden Democrats are as many other similar parties still *männerpartien* (Harteveld et al., 2015). Age-wise, there is no clear profile even though the party performs relatively well among the youngest voters (18–21 years old), much like in the parliamentary election of 2022. The party is overrepresented among the unemployed (20%) and those receiving sickness or disability benefits (24%). The party's voters are also relatively strong among those with the lowest education levels. Additionally, the party is underrepresented among voters who grew up outside Sweden. The relatively low voter turnout of 53.4%, a decrease of nearly 2 percentage points since 2019, and the fact that the party is overrepresented in some of the groups that typically vote to a lesser extent provide some indication of why the Sweden Democrats did not perform as well as it did in the 2022 parliamentary election.

Additional clues are given if we focus on voter mobilization and issue prioritization. It appears that the Sweden Democrats failed to mobilize their supporters to the polls. The party stands out from the others in that it had the highest proportion of voters (59 % compared to the average of 38%) who had decided which party to vote for before the start of the election campaign.



Consequently, the party performed the worst relatively in mobilizing voters in the week leading up to the election (23% compared to the average of 40%). The impression that the party failed to convince its supporters to turn out is strengthened by the fact that the proportion of voters who actually voted for the party was similar to those who said they would vote for the party if there were a parliamentary election today, while other opinion polls on voting intentions for the Riksdag, both shortly before and shortly after the election, showed significantly higher support for the party. So rather than switching to other parties, some Sweden Democrats sympathizers chose to abstain from voting.

The fact that the party supports the incumbent government might partially explain the problem of mobilizing voters. However, the aforementioned troll factory scandal is likely a more plausible partial explanation for why some voters chose to stay home. Even more likely, it was an agenda effect. While crime prevention, one of the party's more important issues, was just as important to voters in 2024 as it was in the 2019 European election, the party's main issue, 'refugees/immigration', was less significant than it had been in both the previous European election and the Riksdag election of 2022. In the exit poll, it was only ranked 11 out of 17 when voters were asked about the importance they attributed to different issues in their choice of party. Only 36% of voters indicated that this issue was of very great importance, which can be compared to 67% for 'peace in Europe', 60% for 'democracy in the EU', and 53% for 'climate', issues not highly prioritized by the Sweden Democrats.

Similarly, the issue of 'national independence', closely related to the Sweden Democrats' message of resistance to transferring more power to Brussels, decreased somewhat compared to the 2019 election and ranked low on voters' priority list. At the same time, the party's positioning as the most EU-sceptical seems to resonate with voters. Among respondents who want Sweden to leave the EU, a significant 54% voted for the Sweden Democrats, compared to 11% for the Left Party, the second Eurosceptic party. The survey also confirms that the European Parliament election is primarily a domestic issue for Sweden Democrats voters. 59% of the party's voters stated that the Sweden Democrats' efforts in Swedish politics were very important in their choice of party. The corresponding figure for other parties varied between 19 and 46%.

## Implications for the future

The 2024 EP election was a serious blow to the self-image of the Sweden Democrats as the eternal election winners. The result was surprising. However, there is no overwhelming evidence that this is the beginning of the end. Rather, it is reasonable to consider the vote decline as an indication that the party will now face ups and downs like most other parties. Moreover, in many respects, the election took place during a perfect storm that resulted in the party's underperformance. The political agenda was dominated by issues not prioritized by the Sweden Democrats. The troll factory revelations also overshadowed the campaign and, perhaps even more importantly, how the party mishandled this crisis. In addition, and most likely due to this mishandling, many potential voters opted for abstention.

For the Sweden Democrats, European elections are still second-order elections. What happens in European Parliament elections and in Brussels is important primarily insofar as it has repercussions on their reputation at home. Despite harsh condemnations from the Swedish government parties following the troll factory revelations, they seemed equally inclined to move on. After all, the government parties are entirely dependent on the support of the Sweden Democrats for their continued survival. Despite the electoral defeat in the European Parliament election, it is important to note that the party still holds three seats in the EP. Most likely, these will be used strategically to join the group that offers the best leverage for their domestic agenda. The party will continue to maintain its position as the most EU-sceptical party in Sweden and express opposition to further transfers of power and money to the EU. At least for now, the most reasonable interpretation of the party's election results seems to be more of a temporary speed bump in the road rather than the start of an uphill journey.

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**THE NETHERLANDS**

# Waking the Sleeping Populist Giant: The 2024 European Elections and Populism in the Netherlands

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## Abstract

The results of the 2024 European elections for populist parties in the Netherlands are intimately related to the events in national Dutch politics since 2021. The relative success of the Party for Freedom (VVD) since 2023 has been related to its more moderate position on European integration and Islam. This change of tone was part of increasing the party's credibility at home and abroad. The European elections were presented as a litmus test for the proposed centre-right government in the Netherlands, and they testified to the increased room for the populist vote in general and the increased competition for that vote between various populist parties in particular. The European elections also proved a defeat for populist contenders such as JA21, Forum for Democracy and the left-wing populist Socialist Party. The impact of Dutch populists on European policies is most likely to be felt via the newly formed government, which contains two populist parties. At the level of the European Parliament, its impact will depend on the success of the newly formed Patriots for Europe (Pfe) group.

*Keywords:* *populism; populist radical right; European elections; Dutch national elections; the Netherlands*

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On 6 June 2024, the elections for the 31 Dutch seats in the European Parliament were held. The total number of Dutch seats had been expanded first from 26 to 29 in 2020 (because of Brexit) and again in 2023 to 31 (because of a redistribution of the total number of seats based on demographic changes [European Parliament, 2023]). Turnout was slightly higher in 2024 at 46%, which was under the European average of 51% but up from the 2019 Dutch turnout of 42%. The 2024 outcome witnessed the resurgence of Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom (PVV) while the centre-left held its ground. In this contribution, we argue that the Dutch results must be understood in the context of the political drama that has been unfolding since the provincial and national elections in 2023 and the subsequent formation of a new government coalition in 2024. In what follows, we first describe the landscape of populist parties in the Netherlands and then compare the 2024 results with the previous European, provincial and national elections. We conclude with a brief discussion of the future role of Dutch populists in Brussels.

## Varieties of Dutch populism: Between continuity and fragmentation

The Netherlands has long been a breeding ground for populism (especially the right-wing variety) since the appearance of Pim Fortuyn and his party List Pim Fortuyn (LPF) in 2002. Over the years, there has been a succession of populist parties competing for populist voters, tapping into different constituencies, ranging from right-wing nativist and left-wing populist to agrarian–populist. Elsewhere, we refer to such a situation as 'mutating populism' (Verbeek and Zaslove, 2016). Mutating populism refers to a party system in which new populist parties enter a system where a populist party is already present, thus potentially ushering in a change in outlook. The entry of these additional populist parties forces all populist parties to distinguish themselves not only from the mainstream parties but also from the other populist parties in the system.

Currently, the Netherlands boasts three types of populist parties (see De Jonge et al., forthcoming 2024). The first type is the populist radical right, consisting of the PVV, Forum for Democracy (FvD), and the Right Answer 2021 (JA21). The second is the populist–agrarian Farmer Citizen Movement (BBB). Third is the left-wing Socialist Party (SP), which is, however, often considered a borderline case of populism (Meijers and Zaslove, 2021). Irrespective of their individual orientations, all populist parties adopt a rather Eurosceptic position.

### ***A crowded landscape: three populist radical-right parties in the Netherlands***

The PVV is a populist radical-right party, much like other populist radical-right parties in Europe, such as the National Rally (RN) in France, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), and Lega in Italy. Much like these parties, the PVV combines populism with nativism. The core of its ideology pits the ‘good’ people versus the ‘corrupt’ elite in both The Hague and Brussels. The party is critical of excessive immigration, in particular from non-Western countries. Traditionally, opposing Islam and favouring the Netherlands exiting the European Union (EU) – a so-called ‘Nexit’ – have been part and parcel of the PVV program. However, during the 2023 Dutch and 2024 European elections, the PVV moderated its opposition to Islam and its demands for Nexit. This moderation resulted from the VVD’s opening up to a coalition with the PVV in the Summer of 2023 (see also below). Economically, the PVV takes a more protectionist and welfare state chauvinist position aimed at protecting its voters in specific economic and social sectors, such as voters with lower incomes and those who, for example, suffer from high energy prices.

FvD is also considered to be a populist and nativist party. However, FvD has more radical stances regarding opposition to EU integration and relations with Russia; it favours Nexit and propagates a more pro-Russia and pro-Putin line. FvD is also more free-market oriented than the PVV and most other populist radical right parties in Europe. JA21 is also regarded as a populist radical-right party. JA21 is slightly less populist than the other populist radical-right parties, while it is nativist and more market oriented than the PVV and most other populist radical-right parties in Europe. In a way, JA21 and its leader, Joost Eerdmans, can be seen as the heirs to Pim Fortuyn’s legacy as a populist with some liberal tendencies, especially regarding the economy.

### ***Beyond the populist radical right: agrarian and left-wing populism***

Much to the surprise of political pundits, a new type of Dutch populism entered the national parliament in 2021 – the Farmer Citizen Movement (BBB). The BBB can be considered a populist party insofar as it posits the good people versus the corrupt elite, tapping into the latent centre–periphery cleavage in the Netherlands. The BBB pits the ordinary citizen and farmer against ‘oat milk cappuccino drinking city dwellers’ and the unresponsive politicians from the major cities in the country’s west (the so-called *Randstad*). BBB’s core issues centre on support for farmers and opposition to radical climate policies (in particular, policies to control nitrogen output), while the party also campaigns for the dignity of the regions in the hinterland.



The SP is often considered among the first populist parties in the Netherlands, constituting the only left-wing populist party in the country, albeit less populist than the other populist parties. Although it identifies a clash between the working people and the economic and political elites, it has a less pronounced homogenous view of the people. Over the years, its leaders have strongly varied in their anti-elitist rhetoric. Jan Marijnissen (party leader between 1988 and 2015) was considered the most populist SP leader. Economic issues dominate the party's ideology, while it always contains a critical stand towards the unequal distribution of wealth due to globalization and neoliberal policies, targeting large corporations, financial institutions and the EU.

### *The electoral fortunes of populism in the Netherlands*

In order to understand the outcome of the 2024 European elections, we need to understand the political space for populism in the Netherlands. Figure 1 shows the electoral results at the national level of the Dutch populist parties since the formation of the PVV in 2006.

Several observations are in order. First, apart from the 2006 elections, the PVV has consistently been the leading populist voice, reaching a peak of 23.5% of the vote in the 2023 national elections, six months before the European elections. Second, due to the increased fragmentation of the Dutch party system, the total space for populism increased to some 38% of the vote in 2023. Third, support for left-wing populism has consistently diminished. Finally, since 2017, a growing number of parties have been competing for the populist vote, forcing them to profile themselves not only vis-à-vis mainstream parties but also each other. The inability of the SP to attract economically left-wing and welfare chauvinist voters is particularly interesting, speaking, perhaps, to what voters may see as the party's lack of true commitment to an anti-immigrant stance and because the populist radical right's (i.e., the PVV) focus on creating an economic safety net – as opposed to calling for economic redistribution to combat inequality – is more appealing to populist voters.



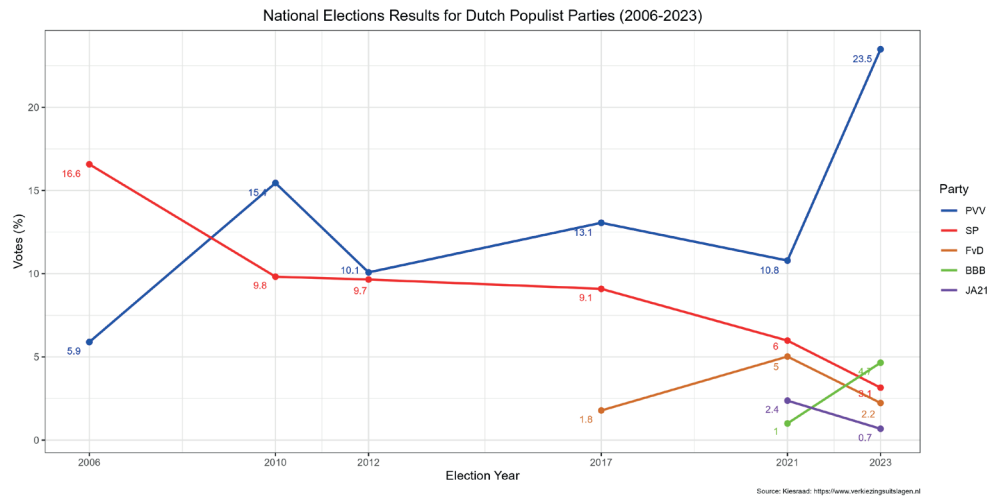
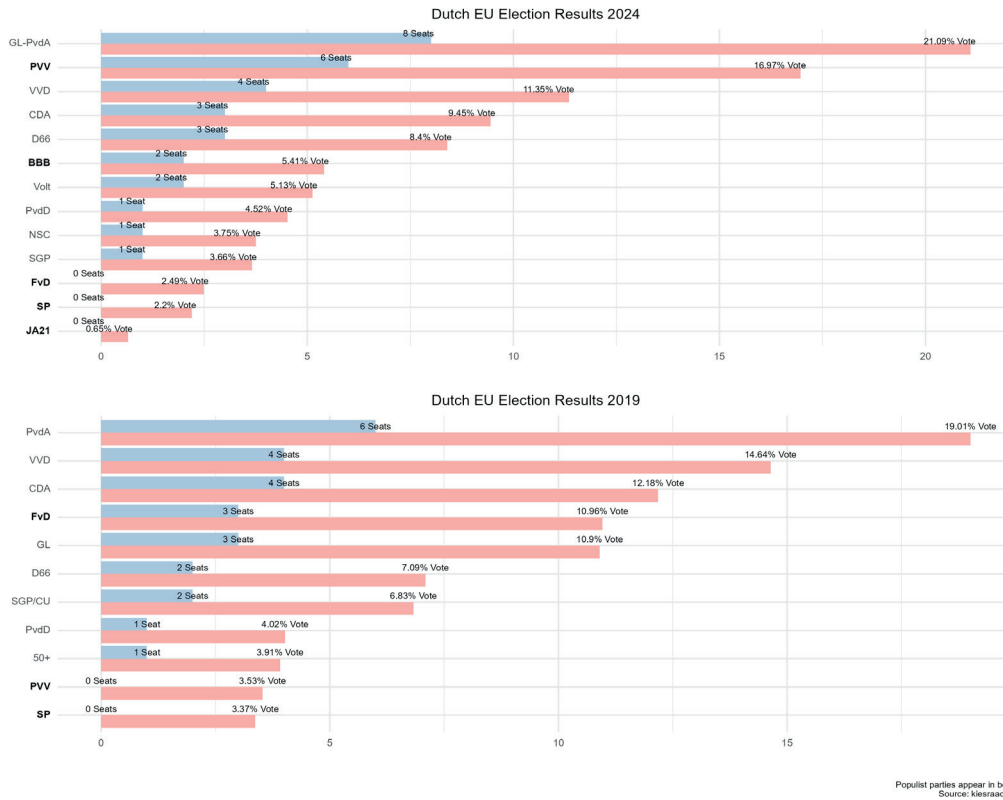


Figure 2 draws our attention to the European elections. It describes not only the results of those parties that succeeded in obtaining at least one seat but also the percentage of votes for all populist parties. A caveat is in order: the increase in Dutch seats from 26 to 31 complicates comparisons with previous European elections.



In the 2024 elections all populist parties combined earned some 28% of the Dutch vote, compared to 18% in 2019 – a considerable gain. Right-wing populists scored 20.1% of the vote in 2024 compared to 14.5% in 2019, again showing a substantial increase. Figure 2 shows that the PVV and the BBB were the only two populist parties that could turn these votes into seats in the 2024 elections, while FvD was the only populist party to obtain seats in the 2019 elections. These figures represent the



volatility of the populist vote: between the two European elections, we have seen the rise and fall of FvD, the comet-like rise of the BBB, and the resurgence of the PVV, which failed to win a single seat in the European Parliament in 2019. On the left of the political spectrum, the SP has shown a decline since its success in 2014, when it obtained almost 10% of the vote. At the same time, Dutch mainstream parties succeeded in holding the fort, gaining 51% in 2024 compared to 54% in 2019.

The main question, therefore, is how to explain the extreme volatility in the (right-wing) populist vote and the eventual comeback of the PVV on the European scene. In other words, how do we account for the awakening of the sleeping populist giant? Here, we argue that in order to understand the results of the European elections, we have to take political developments within the Netherlands into account, in particular, the fall of the Rutte IV government in the summer of 2023, the subsequent national elections on 22 November 2023 and the following government formation negotiations, which only formally ended after the European elections with the appointment of the Schoof I government on 2 July 2024. In that sense, the European elections were part and parcel of the political drama that had characterized Dutch politics effectively since the 2021 national elections.

## A second-order election? The crucial domestic context of the 2024 EP elections

In Dutch politics, European elections are part of a five-year cycle encompassing municipal, provincial, national and European elections. Since the European elections of 2019, the Netherlands has witnessed national elections in 2021 and 2023, municipal elections in 2022, provincial elections in 2023 and European elections again in 2024.

Our story begins with the 2023 provincial elections, which saw the unexpected emergence of the newest kid on the populist block, the agrarian–populist BBB. Its success, at the time, came at the behest of both the populist PVV and the mainstream Christian democratic party, the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA). The BBB's rise was partly the result of the politicization of climate policies in compliance with the European Green Deal of 2019. The Green Deal was particularly important for farmers and fishermen who mobilized against EU climate policies. In addition, the BBB succeeded in exploiting the latent centre–periphery tensions in the Netherlands.

The provincial elections and the rise of the BBB bring us to the second part of our story. In previous years the reputation of governments led by Mark Rutte had been tarnished by political scandal, in particular the tax office's treatment of socially vulnerable groups and the government's reluctance to act decisively after reports that gas exploitation in the northern province of Groningen had provoked earthquakes causing severe damage to houses. In 2023 the fourth coalition under Mark Rutte (composed of CDA, CU, D66, VVD) was made vulnerable by the farmers' protests, the rise of BBB and the troubles these events caused for the CDA. Anticipating a potential deadlock within the government over climate policies, Prime Minister Rutte and his VVD sought to profile themselves by politicizing the issue of asylum and migration, exploiting images of overburdened asylum registration centres and the suggestion that family unification of migrants had accelerated migration. The Rutte IV government eventually fell in July 2023 over intra-coalition conflicts over family unification, leading to new elections in November. It also ushered in a leadership change within the VVD. Importantly, two EU-related themes were explicitly selected to dominate the national elections campaign and would also affect the 2024 European elections campaign: EU asylum and migration policies and EU climate policies.

This brings us to the third part of our story: the 2023 Dutch national elections. These elections coincided with several significant developments. First, the change in VVD party leadership produced a change of strategy towards the PVV. Rutte had consistently excluded the PVV as a coalition partner since 2012. The new VVD party leader, Dilan Yeşilgöz, openly suggested that her party would no longer exclude forming a government with Wilders. Second, the mainstream parties suffered from the rise of a new maverick party, New Social Contract (NSC), founded by former CDA MP Pieter Omtzigt. The NSC positioned itself in the centre-right with a major emphasis on good governance, migration and economic security, polling some 20% in the summer of 2023. The NSC drew voters from a broad range of parties, particularly the CDA and VVD. This situation made a future coalition of mainstream parties look increasingly difficult.

Taking advantage of the new situation, Wilders presented himself as a more moderate candidate: he claimed to no longer favour a Brexit, promised to reform the EU from within, and toned down his opposition to Islam. This shift changed the overall political landscape and the nature of party competition, and Wilders profited from the politicization of migration and his ostensible moderation regarding the EU and Islam. No longer perceived as a pariah by former opponents



and an increasing number of voters, Wilders' PVV succeeded in becoming the largest political party, increasing the number of seats in parliament from 17 to 37.

The November 2023 elections were just the beginning of a lengthy government formation process, which would last until July 2024, encompassing the June European elections. This brings us to the fourth part of our story. Initially, the government formation process was characterized by a long-drawn-out testing of the PVV's democratic credentials. In the end, the four negotiating right-wing parties (the BBB, the NSC, the PVV, and the VVD) were able to find each other on policies aimed at curtailing migration and slowing down EU-required climate policies. This brings us to the fifth and final part of the story: the European elections. These occurred after the four negotiating parties had reached a formal but tentative agreement for a possible government coalition in May 2024. In that sense, the European elections were a litmus test of the legitimacy of the newly proposed coalition.

Indeed, the European election campaign was framed by the centre-left (the GreenLeft–Labour party, GL–PvdA) as an opportunity for voters to express their discontent with the likely government that, in their words, consisted of anti-EU populists and extremists (GroenLinksPvdA, 2024). The actual electoral outcome witnessed a poor performance for the incoming coalition (some 38% of the vote, compared to 56% at the 2023 national elections). It confirmed, however, the PVV's leading position in that coalition despite the drop in support for the PVV between the general and the European elections. At the same time, the centre-left did not emerge as strong enough to challenge the newly formed coalition despite GL–PvdA's success in becoming the largest party at the European elections.

## The populist campaign for the European elections

The campaign for the European elections was relatively short, even by Dutch standards, lasting about five weeks but never inviting excitement. The PVV canvassed only rarely. Only FvD toured the entire country extensively with their 'Freedom Touring Bus', which was, however, ignored by most media outlets. Observers complained that the campaign hardly touched upon party programs and instead focused, for example, on the European friends of Geert Wilders who would profit from a PVV victory (Mudde, 2024). Although Wilders himself did not extensively campaign in the Netherlands, he proved visible at the European level, where he

appeared with the likes of Marine le Pen and Matteo Salvini (France 24, 2024).

In this section we first describe those populist parties that were the only two to receive seats in the EU parliament (BBB and PVV). Next, we discuss the party programs of the other relevant populist parties (FvD, JA21 and SP).

In line with its more moderate campaign during the 2023 national elections, the PVV's European electoral program emphasized the need to reform the EU from within rather than to leave the Union. Within that context, focusing on safeguarding sovereignty, it vehemently called for opt-out possibilities for the Netherlands regarding asylum seekers and migration and for relaxing obligations concerning climate change, especially nitrogen. Importantly, the PVV supported strengthening defence, albeit without singling out Russia as the main threat. In its populist rhetoric the PVV targeted power-seeking Eurocrats who spend money at the expense of ordinary citizens (PVV, 2024).

The BBB's program reflected its roots in the agrarian sector and its attention to regional interests. It proposed a 'European Senate' based on the European Committee of the Regions. At the same time, the BBB campaigned for curbs on the European Commission's power and to protect member states' veto rights. It focused on reducing the European Green Deal policies, arguing for a "Real Deal" instead. Notably, it presented itself as the champion of Dutch fishermen, who, according to the BBB, suffer from European fishing policies. Like the PVV regarding asylum and migration policies, the BBB favoured a toughening of asylum policies and an increase of national competences regarding labour migration (BBB, 2024). There are signs that the BBB is moving in the direction of a populist radical-right party. However, at this moment, the party's core issues concern the rural-urban divide, while it is too early to tell if the party and its voters are as nativist as other populist radical-right parties.

This discussion warrants several important observations. First, the PVV has moderated its position regarding EU integration. Second, the rise of the BBB has broadened the range of populist issues to be represented in Brussels, particularly climate change policies. Despite the moderation of the PVV, both parties remain decidedly Eurosceptic, lambasting Eurocrats as 'enemies of the people'.

FvD, JA21 and the SP are the three other populist parties that competed in the European elections. FvD was in favour of a, opposed sending troops to Ukraine,





and remained critical of sanctions against Russia. It demanded the protection of Europeans from mass immigration from non-Western countries, while it also opposed 'wokeism' and climate policies (FvD, 2024). JA21 presented itself as a party of free trade that seeks to reform the EU on the basis of subsidiarity. It called for an immigration policy that resembles the Australian model, implying the regional accommodation of asylum seekers, more robust return policies, and limited access to social programs (JA21, 2024). In short, JA21 presents itself as more market oriented and less Eurosceptic than the other populist radical-right parties. In its electoral program, the left-wing populist SP pleaded for a Europe that does not work at the behest of capital. The party sees the current EU as an entity under the tutelage of international economic elites. Despite the party's criticism of the current EU model, it is less Eurosceptic than the other populist radical-right parties (SP, 2024). Unlike in other European countries, such as France, where parties such as La France Insoumise (LFI) are able to mobilize left-wing opposition to EU integration, there appears to be less room for a left-wing Eurosceptic party among left-wing voters in the Netherlands. At the same time, the populist radical right has solidified the Eurosceptic vote among right-wing voters.

The EU elections were important for Dutch politics for several reasons. First, the elections tentatively confirmed the nascent government coalition. The fact that the PVV was the second-largest party in the EU elections confirmed its credibility among a sizeable number of Dutch voters. Historically, voter turnout among PVV voters at European elections tends to be relatively low. Actually, 56% of those who voted PVV in the 2023 national elections did not vote in the EU elections (NOS, 2024). Despite this lower turnout among PVV voters in comparison with the 2023 national elections, the party emerged as the second-largest party in the European elections. The BBB, a relatively new party, obtained two seats. The populist members of the nascent coalition thus appeared to have passed the litmus test of the European elections.

## The populists go to Brussels

What do these election results imply for the positions of the Dutch populists within the EU and, more specifically, within the EP? First, the combination of results of the Dutch national elections and the European elections positions the Netherlands as a more Eurosceptic country than under previous Dutch governments. The incoming Schoof I government has not called for Nexit. However, at the same time, the incoming government has set its mind on demanding special considerations

from Brussels, particularly regarding asylum and migration policies, climate policies and the plight of Dutch fishermen.

The role that the Dutch populists will play in Brussels is less clear. The BBB, although a small party, intends to sit with the European People's Party (EPP). Even though the BBB is an agrarian–populist party, its roots are in the Christian democratic tradition. The degree to which the party will be able to influence the more conservative and more climate-sceptical forces within the EPP remains uncertain.

The influence of the PVV depends in part on the degree to which the populist radical right can form a cohesive group within the EP. Geert Wilders has long had a compelling international reputation among other radical-right populists in Europe, ranging from Orbán in Hungary and Salvini in Italy to Le Pen in France. At the time of writing, the most recent developments have seen the PVV joining Orbán's newly formed EP group, Patriots for Europe (Pfe), whereas, in the last parliament, it belonged to the Identity and Democracy group.

At this moment, the extent to which the Pfe will be able to have a tangible impact is uncertain: It does appear that the newly formed group has been able to attract the most important populist radical-right parties, holding 84 seats (at the time of writing this chapter) in the EU parliament. However, the question is: will the Pfe group have enough influence to strike deals with, for example, the EPP and thus contribute to the PVV's domestic success? Moreover, will this group continue to hold together, despite differences on issues such as relations with Russia? The PVV may find it difficult to walk the tightrope between an EU group that has pro-Russian tendencies within the group and forces within the Netherlands that are clearly pro-Ukraine, especially given the PVV's allies in the new Schoof I government.

In general, the future impact of the Dutch populists in Europe, in particular that of the PVV, is likely to be felt via the intergovernmental route: because of its weight in the new, more Eurosceptic, government coalition, its impact will resonate through meetings within the institutions where member states dominate. Nevertheless, it is also possible that the PVV will play a decisive role within the Pfe group in the EP. The PVV is one of the leading actors within the current Dutch government, despite its playing a typical populist strategy by placing one foot in the cabinet and one foot in the parliament (Zaslove, 2012). Nevertheless, the strength and influence that the PVV has within the current Dutch government may strengthen its influence within the Pfe in Europe.



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## Conclusion

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This report has examined the electoral performances of populist parties in the 2024 European elections. The collection of country chapters provides a unique source of information to understand the electoral dynamics of populist parties across Europe, highlighting similarities and differences in the economic, social and political context of the European elections in the 27 EU member states. Here, we summarize the main findings from the individual chapters and provide some general conclusions.

### The diversity of the European populist scene

The individual country chapters illustrate the diversity of populism in Europe and the variety of its manifestations across the political spectrum. The findings in this report corroborate the vast literature on populism, which has long identified the plurality of articulations between the ‘thin’ ideology of populism and the ‘thicker’ host ideologies to which it attaches itself. As suggested in the individual chapters, in Western Europe, populism is essentially found to the left and right of the spectrum, while in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), we see a more diverse array of populist actors.

Some individual countries provide a good illustration of such diversity. The Netherlands has long been a breeding ground for populism. Over the years, there has been a succession of populist parties, ranging from right-wing nativist and left-wing populist to agrarian populist. Similarly, Spain has experienced both left and right-wing populism with Podemos and Vox. In Belgium, there are two cases of populist radical parties to the left (PTB–PVDA) and right (VB) of the ideological spectrum. Italy has been described as nothing less than a ‘populist paradise’, hosting a wide range

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of populist parties. Such diversity is also found in countries like France and, more recently, Germany, with the rise of the BSW to the left of the party spectrum. While in Greece, left-populist parties have been dominant with Syriza and KKE, the populist radical right has long been present with parties such as Golden Dawn and, most recently, with EL and the Democratic Patriotic Movement or 'Niki'.

There is even more diversity when looking at the populist scene in Central and Eastern Europe. Populists in the centre dominated the elections in Bulgaria, with GERB gaining over 24% of the vote, and in the Czech Republic, with ANO securing 26%. The centrist Prodalzhavame promyanata (PP) and ITN in Bulgaria also registered strong results, with 14% and 6% of the vote, respectively. In Slovakia, it was the left populists of SMER who carried the day, securing 25% of all votes cast. The radical right fared well in all three countries, with Vazrazhdane gaining over 14% in Bulgaria, Hnutie Republika attracting 13% in Slovakia, and Přísaha a Motoristé registering over 10% of the vote in the Czech Republic.

Diversity is also found in the interpretation of populism by populist parties. While populism is still seen as a core feature of the populist right across most cases, there seems to have been a shift away from populist narratives and themes in some parties of the populist left, such as Podemos in Spain, the SP in the Netherlands, and the SF in Denmark. In Spain, for instance, there has been a decline in the use of populist ideas by Podemos, which has turned more clearly to radical-left ones. Moreover, there seems to be less consensus about the populist nature of radical-left parties, as illustrated by Die Linke in Germany, the Left Wing Alliance (VAS) in Finland, the Left Party in Sweden, and the Left Bloc (BE) in Portugal, which may also signal a move away from populism towards a more classic radical-left agenda. The Bulgarian GERB has also significantly moved away from populist narratives, focusing primarily on pro-EU rhetoric. While the Romanian AUR remains Eurosceptic, it has been focusing on specific issues rather than on criticizing the European project itself.

Together with their different locations on the party spectrum, populist parties also diverge in their issue positions. As the country chapters show, this is particularly true of the populist right where substantial differences are found, for instance, in terms of those parties' economic policies.

In a context marked by rising prices and the inflation crisis, right-wing populist parties have adopted a wide array of economic positions, reflecting diverging



economic strategies and the adaptation by populist parties to different contextual opportunities. In France, for example, the RN has significantly moved to the economic left, advocating redistributive policies. In Denmark, the DF combines welfare-chauvinist positions with a good portion of nostalgia. In the Netherlands, the PVV takes a protectionist and welfare-chauvinist position aimed at voters with lower incomes who are most hit by high energy prices. In Cyprus, ELAM supports left-wing economic policies aimed at wealth redistribution and increased state intervention in market regulation. In Estonia, EKRE focuses on economic welfare and regional disparities, as does the EL in Greece, although it combines welfare chauvinism and government interventions with calls for low taxation. Welfare chauvinism and socialist nostalgia have been the trademarks of radical-right populist parties in Bulgaria, but they have also been explored by left populists such as SMER in Slovakia.

In contrast, other right-wing populist parties are found on the economic right. The Dutch FvD, for instance, is more free-market-oriented than the PVV and most other populist radical-right parties in Europe. In Finland, the Finns Party has recently turned to the right on the economy. In Luxembourg, the Alternativ Demokratesch Reformpartei (ADR) exhibits a national-conservative profile and generally maintains a distrust of big government. In Greece, Niki is more free market and low taxation than EL. In Romania, AUR has increasingly introduced neoconservative elements.

Finally, the analysis in this report shows that populist parties differ widely with regard to their political status within their respective political systems. Parties such as the French RN and German Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) are still political pariahs. In Germany, the AfD remains deeply unpopular, and the party has faced strong criticism for its many controversial statements and positions regarding immigration, Islam and the Second World War. In France, despite Marine Le Pen's de-demonization strategy, the persistence of the RN's profile as a political pariah was exposed in the 2024 legislative elections where the traditional Republican Front – that is, ad hoc alliances of parties or voters (or both) across the spectrum whenever the RN is likely to win a decisive round – was revitalized. In contrast, Mélenchon's populist left LFI has managed to establish itself as a coalition partner to the rest of the left. Another case of a *cordon sanitaire* around the populist radical right is that of Belgium, where leaders of the N-VA continue to close the door to the Vlaams Belang. In Central and Eastern Europe, extreme parties such as Vazrazhdane in Bulgaria, AUR in Romania or Hnutie Republika in Slovakia are still kept outside

mainstream politics despite growing electoral support.

Elsewhere, however, the current trend is one of increasing mainstreaming and normalization of populist parties as a result of a dual process of modernization and moderation by populists, on the one hand, and accommodation of populist ideas and policies by mainstream parties, on the other hand. Such dual process has been well documented in the recent populism literature (Akkerman, de Lange, and Rooduijn, 2016; Herman and Muldoon, 2019; Mondon and Winter, 2020; Mudde, 2019) and the country chapters in this report corroborate both the centripetal move by a number of populist parties from the margins to the centre of national politics and the accommodation of populism by mainstream actors.

Populist accommodation by parties of the mainstream is traditionally found in countries such as Italy and Austria. In CEE, such cooperation has been found in Poland, Slovakia and Bulgaria during the 2017–2019 government. This has more recently been the case, for instance, in the Netherlands, where the change in VVD party leadership has produced a change of strategy towards the PVV, with the new VVD party leader Dilan Yeşilgöz openly suggesting that her party would no longer exclude a government with Wilders. In Sweden, the cordon sanitaire was breached before the 2022 parliamentary election when three of the centre-right parties expressed a more open stance towards the Sweden Democrats. In Cyprus, despite its radical positions and extreme right-wing roots, ELAM has managed to integrate into the political mainstream, collaborating with other parties on specific issues in the House of Representatives since 2016.

## Populists against Europe? The strategic moderation of populist Euroscepticism

The modernization of populist politics concerns, in particular, the moderation and blurring of those parties' positions regarding European integration. The country chapters illustrate such a dampening of Eurosceptic politics, both left and right of the populist spectrum. In many cases, the analysis shows that populist parties have recently abandoned their previous hard Eurosceptic plans to exit the Euro or the EU, often adopting ambiguous positions vis-à-vis European integration and a softer tone vis-à-vis the EU. As discussed in the introduction of this report, this represents a strategic move by populists to increase their appeal to moderate and pro-EU voters and to foster collaboration with mainstream parties.



In France, the RN has abandoned its previous policy of “Frexit”, while de-emphasizing European issues to increase its appeal to moderate voters. Like the RN, LFI has toned down its Euroscepticism in recent years, moving away from its previous call to leave the EU and that France should disobey the European treaties. In Sweden, the SD have moderated their Euroscepticism and dropped their demand for a referendum on EU withdrawal. Such a move has also been visible in the Netherlands, where Wilders has successfully presented himself as a more moderate candidate, no longer calling for a Nexit but promising to reform the EU from within. In Portugal, Chega has articulated some soft Euroscepticism in its European election manifesto. In Italy, Fratelli d’Italia advocates for national sovereignty over supranational integration while maintaining a relatively moderate stance on opposition to the European Union. A similar dampening of Eurosceptic policies and themes has been found in the Lega and M5S since 2018. In Finland, the Finns Party has abandoned its long-term goal of withdrawing from the EU. A stronger support for the EU is found in Luxembourg, where the ADR explicitly acknowledges the great advances the EU had given to Europe in terms of peace and prosperity in post-war Europe while praising the positive benefits the EU and immigration have brought to the country. In Greece, the left-populist Syriza put forward a version of soft Euroscepticism, criticizing the EU’s democratic deficit. The right-wing populist EL has been advocating for a Europe made of nation-states, but it has not been openly calling for Grexit, and neither has the other new right-wing populist party, Niki. The FPÖ clearly stated that it would not aim for an ‘Öxit’, although it called for cuts in the EU budget and institutions and a Union based on subsidiarity and federalism.

In Western Europe, the German AfD stands out for its hard Eurosceptic positions. The most radical faction has dominated the AfD since 2017. In the run-up to the 2024 European elections, the party initially called for the dissolution of the European Union in its manifesto but dropped this demand from the final manifesto after facing public backlash. The Dutch FvD similarly favours Nexit. In Greece, the communist KKE has similarly maintained a hard Eurosceptic stance (as well as an anti-NATO stance), supporting Greece’s exit from the EU and accusing it of being imperialistic, anti-democratic, capitalist and exploitative.

Populists in Central and Eastern Europe widely vary in their level of Euroscepticism. The Croatian right-populist DL, for example, exhibits a soft Eurosceptic orientation, framing the EU as a confederation of sovereign states and never advocating for closer relations with ‘alternative partners’ in global politics,

such as Russia, China or the BRICS. The DL expresses a strong opinion against further EU enlargement due to Serbia's candidacy status, while the Romanian AUR, on the contrary, advocates for EU memberships for Moldova. By contrast, the Bulgarian Vazrazhdane urges for an immediate exit from NATO and the EU, while centrist populist parties in Bulgaria, such as GERB and PP, are ardently pro-European. Czech populists from the centre and the right expressed different levels of criticism towards the EU. ANO, which has been in opposition since 2021, gradually shifted from a mildly pro-European stance towards soft Euroscepticism. The SPD, on the other hand, has sustained its uncompromisingly anti-immigration and hard Eurosceptic rhetoric, describing the EU as a 'dictatorship in Brussels' dominated by 'non-elected bureaucrats' who produce 'directives that are against the interests of our state and our people'. Euroscepticism is extremely limited in Estonia, where 77–78% of the population supports EU membership.

Similarly, in Latvia, voters tend to support sober, politically experienced personalities to represent Latvia's national (rather than party) interests in the European Parliament, leaving little room for Eurosceptic rhetoric. In Romania, AUR has softened its Euroscepticism, while the new SOS prides itself in being the first to advocate for a 'Ro-exit'. In Slovakia, the ruling SMER claims to support EU membership despite its many shortcomings, while ĽSNS argues that the EU cannot be reformed. Consequently, its party leader promised to 'lay the groundwork for Slovakia's exit from the European Union and break the EU from within'.

Populist parties, particularly of the radical right, have been shying away from hard Eurosceptic positions, emphasizing an intergovernmental vision of a community of sovereign and independent states, now claiming to reform the EU 'from within' while opposing further enlargement of the EU. As the country chapters in this report show, right-wing populist parties across Europe continue to vilify a 'bureaucratic EU'. 'Taking back control' from Brussels has become a common theme of right-wing populist narratives. In Belgium, the VB has been using the 'taking back control' tagline while denouncing EU leaders as 'extremists', bureaucrats and technocrats. In the Netherlands, the PVV's European electoral program emphasized the need to reform the EU from within rather than to leave the Union. In Italy, while cooperating with the EU, Giorgia Meloni's FdI continues to engage in ideological struggles on specific policies such as civil liberties, environmental issues, gender equality and EU constitutional matters. The Danish DF claims the EU needs to be strongly downsized to safeguard national sovereignty, a similar claim to that of the Denmark Democrats, which ask for 'less EU' and more national sovereignty.



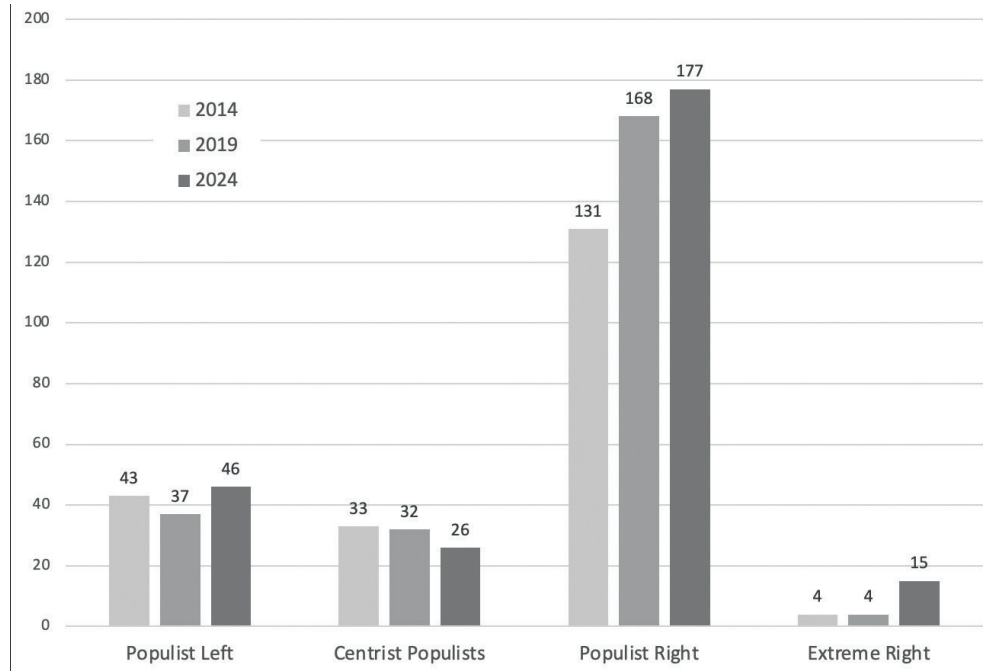


## Were the 2024 EP elections another ‘populist’ moment?

Rather than showing a new wave of populism, the results of the 2024 European elections have essentially confirmed the electoral consolidation of the populist phenomenon in Europe. In 2019, taking all groups together, populist parties had won 241 seats, representing about a third (32%) of all 751 seats in the European Parliament. In 2024, these parties won 263 of the 720 seats – approximately 36% (see Figure 1, Tables 1, 2 and 3).

Such results reflect the rise in support for populism in recent national elections as well as the increase in the number and geographical spread of populist parties across Europe. Based on the delineation of populism in the country chapters, no less than 60 populist parties across 26 EU member states gained representation in the European Parliament in June 2024. In comparison, a total of 40 populist parties had won seats in 22 EU countries in the 2019 election.

Figure 1. Populist parties’ seats in the European Parliament in 2014, 2019 and 2024



Source: Ivaldi (2020); updated with the 2024 results

Populist party performances varied, however, across countries and different brands of populism. Moreover, the new distribution of seats should not mask distortions due to the relative weight of national representations in the European Parliament. In June 2024, the largest contingents of populist MEPs came mainly

from the populist right in the more populated European countries, in particular from France's Rassemblement National (30 seats), Fratelli d'Italia (24 seats), the Polish PiS (20 seats), the German AfD (15 seats) and Hungary's Fidesz (11 seats). In the populist left, the largest contingent came from France's LFI (9 seats). For centrist populist parties, the largest delegations were elected in Italy with the M5S (8 seats) and in the Czech Republic, where ANO received seven seats.

### ***Asymmetrical populist performances***

The results of the 2024 European elections have essentially attested to the consolidation of the populist right, while left-wing and centrist populist parties have received comparatively less support across Europe.

The populist right has established its presence in virtually all EU member states – there are no fewer than 50 such parties in Europe. Right-wing populist parties have done particularly well in countries such as France, Italy, Poland, Hungary, Belgium, Austria, Bulgaria, Romania, and the Netherlands; in many countries, the populist right-wing scene is made up of two, three and sometimes more parties.

There has also been a diversification of the populist right with the emergence of new actors. Alongside the major established players, new parties have emerged, including the Danish Democrats (DD), Latvia First (LPV), Chega in Portugal, the EL and Niki in Greece, the AUR and SOS in Romania, and the Czech Přísaha and PRO. In Lithuania, a populist radical-right politician and his party TSS made a breakthrough, gaining a seat in the EP for the first time. Other movements have disappeared or been replaced by new populist parties. This is particularly true in Central and Eastern Europe, where party systems traditionally remain more fluid. The Bulgarian Ataka, long represented in the national assembly and the European Parliament, has all but disappeared since 2021, only to be replaced by Vazrazhdane. Golden Dawn, which came third in the 2015 elections in Greece, practically disappeared by 2019 when it failed to enter the national parliament. Its leadership was subsequently imprisoned following a prolonged trial on charges of running a criminal organization. Although the party disappeared, its ideology and electorate were easily picked up by EL, which has been represented since 2019 both in the national and in the European parliaments. Interestingly, small extreme right-wing anti-immigration parties (i.e., the Irish Freedom Party, National Party, Ireland First and The Irish People) have surfaced in a country like Ireland, which has traditionally been more immune to far-right populism in the past, suggesting that the immigration issue has acquired more resonance in Irish politics in recent years.



Altogether, parties of the populist right won 177 seats, making up about a quarter (24%) of all 720 seats in the new European Parliament, an increase on their previous performances in 2019 – 168 seats out of 751, that is about 22% (see Figure 1). Amongst the biggest winners were the French RN, the Italian Fratelli d'Italia, the FPÖ in Austria, the VB in Flanders, the Slovenian Democratic Party, the AUR in Romania and the National Alliance in Latvia, which all saw a significant rise in electoral support in the 2024 European elections. Let us also note that the 2024 elections have seen the rise of extreme right-wing nationalist parties across a number of EU member states, as illustrated by the electoral success of Vazrazhdane in Bulgaria, the Confederation in Poland, Hnutie Republika in Slovakia, ELAM in Cyprus, and Domovinski Pokret (DP) in Croatia. Altogether, parties that may be classified as 'extreme right-wing' won 15 seats in the European Parliament, significantly increasing their presence since the 2019 elections, where the extreme right-wing had received only 4 seats.

Such a wave of support for right-wing populists has been far from uniform, however, as a number of those parties have suffered losses across Europe. In Portugal, Chega lost nearly 783,000 votes from its general election tally, down to 9.8% of the vote. In Spain, while clearly improving its results from the 2019 EP elections, Vox lost significant support when compared with the 2023 general elections. In Sweden, the SD fell far behind the result of the 2022 parliamentary election. Fidesz in Hungary lost 2 seats despite winning the elections, facing a serious challenge by the new opposition party Tisza. Although PiS and Konfederacija collectively attracted almost half of the votes, PiS lost 9 seats in the EP – the biggest reversal in support in its history.

Compared with their right-wing counterparts, the parties of the populist left have been comparatively less successful, although they have somewhat improved their performance from five years ago. As Figure 1 shows, the populist left won a total of 46 seats in the new European Parliament in June, which represented just over 6% of all 720 seats. This result compared with 37 seats (about 5%) in the previous Parliament. As was the case for the populist right, left-wing populist party performances varied substantially across countries.

In countries such as Ireland, Greece, the Netherlands and Spain, there was a drop in support for the populist left, reflecting the more general decline in support for those parties since the 2008 financial crisis. In Ireland, Sinn Féin suffered significant losses, seeing much of his previous support going to independent or

small-party candidates. In the Netherlands, the SP received a mere 2.2% of the vote, showing a decline since its success in 2014 when it had obtained almost 10% of the vote. The Spanish Podemos only received 3.3% of the vote, compared with 20% in 2016 –in alliance with Izquierda Unida (IU) at the time. In the case of Podemos, such decline reflected a variety of factors, including government participation and the recovery of macroeconomic indicators. In Greece, Syriza lost about 3 percentage points on its score in the June 2023 general election, down to 14.9% of the vote, although EKK maintained its 2 MEP seats, as well as representation in the national parliament.

In countries like Belgium and France, there were mixed performances for the populist left. The progress of the Belgian PTB–PVDA was asymmetrical, with the party making more significant gains on the Dutch-speaking side, almost doubling its score. In France, Mélenchon’s left-wing populist LFI won 9.9% of the vote, which represented a gain of 3.6 percentage points on its previous result in the 2019 EP elections, yet far lower than Mélenchon’s performance at 22% in the 2022 presidential election.

Support for the populist left rose, on the other hand, in Nordic countries such as Denmark and Finland. The Danish Red-Green Alliance won 7% of the vote (+2 percentage points compared to the legislative elections of November 2022). In Finland, the biggest surprise came from the Left Alliance (VAS), which came in second with 17.3% of the vote and three seats as opposed to one in the previous parliament. In Slovakia, SMER managed to regain political control in the 2023 national elections and increase its representation in the European Parliament from 3 to 5 seats – a major comeback for Robert Fico, who survived an assassination attempt just a month before the EP elections.

Finally, the 2024 European elections have confirmed centrist populism as a relatively marginal political phenomenon, essentially concentrated in Central and Eastern Europe. In June 2024, only 26 seats were won by centrist populist parties, making up just under 4% of all seats in the new European Parliament, which was very close to those parties’ performances five years ago (32 seats representing just over 4%).

While well-established centrist populist parties such as ANO in the Czech Republic and GERB in Bulgaria managed to secure their electoral support from the previous national elections, winning 7 and 5 seats, respectively, other centrist



populist parties performed less well. In Bulgaria, PP lost heavily on their previous performance in the April 2023 elections and secured only two seats in the new European Parliament. This was also the case with the Darbo Partija in Lithuania, which lost most of its support from the last general election and failed to capture a single seat in the EP. Other parties' results oscillated, such as for ITN in Bulgaria, which won the July 2021 early national elections, disappeared from the national parliament in the early national elections in 2022 and reappeared in 2023, gaining a single seat in the EP at the 2024 elections. New centrist populist parties, such as the Czech Přísaha, managed to surpass the threshold, sending one MEP to Brussels. Others, such as Stabilitātei! in Latvia and OL'aNO and SaS in Slovakia, failed to pass the threshold at the European Parliament elections despite gaining representation in the national parliaments in 2022 and 2023, respectively.

In Italy, the results of the 2024 elections have attested to the continuing electoral decline of the M5S. The party received 10% of the vote and eight seats, significantly losing ground from its previous performances in the 2019 European (17.1% of the vote cast) and 2022 general elections (15.4%).

### *A regional divide?*

As mentioned earlier, the distribution of populism across Europe shows a regional divide (see Table 1). In the 2024 European elections, left-wing populism was primarily found in Western Europe, where 13 of those parties were in competition, as opposed to only 2 in Eastern and Central Europe (i.e., SMER in Slovakia and Levica in Slovenia). Conversely, centrist populism was essentially located in CEE countries, which had nine of those parties, as opposed to only two in Western Europe (i.e., the M5S in Italy and the BBB in the Netherlands). Populist radical-right parties were in the majority, and they were predominantly found in Western European countries (21 as opposed to 12 in CEE). Finally, the regional distribution of populism shows the rise of extreme right-wing parties in countries of the former Soviet Union, with no less than 11 of those parties competing in the 2024 European elections, as opposed to only one (ELAM in Cyprus) in the western part of the EU.

Table 1. Number of parties by populist family across Western and Eastern Europe

	Countries	Left	Centrist	Right	Radical Right	Extreme Right	Total
<b>Eastern</b>	11	2	9	4	12	11	38
<b>Western</b>	15	13	2	2	21	1	39
	26	15	11	6	33	12	77

Source: Compiled by the authors based on Rooduijn et al. (2023) and 2024 EP election data.



Such an uneven distribution of populism makes it difficult to accurately evaluate regional differences in populist party electoral support across Western and Central and Eastern Europe. As the country chapters clearly illustrate, there was a significant amount of variation in the electoral performances of populist parties in the 2024 European elections, both across and within regions. Moreover, no less than 27 populist parties were new parties that had not run in the 2019 European elections, thus rendering the analysis of change in populist party support even more difficult.

Table 2. Average electoral support by populist party family across Western and Eastern Europe

	<b>Average % of vote 2024 European elections and change from most recent national election</b>				
	<b>Left</b>	<b>Centrist</b>	<b>Right</b>	<b>Radical Right</b>	<b>Extreme Right</b>
<b>Eastern</b>	29.5*	9.36	1.21	14.61	5.65
<b>Change</b>	(+1.1)	(-3.3)	(+0.9)	(+1.4)	(+1.8)
<b>Western</b>	7.28	7.69*	10.67*	11.63	11.19*
<b>Change</b>	(-0.2)	(-2.4)	(+2.0)	(+0.9)	(+4.4)

Source: Compiled by the authors based on 2024 EP election data.

\* These results should be interpreted with caution due to the small number of parties (n ! 2).

Table 2 shows the mean electoral support for populist parties in the 2024 European elections and the change from the most recent general election. The data are broken down by region and populist party family. Because of such heterogeneity, the data in Table 2 should be taken with caution. These data confirm, however, that centrist and left-wing populist parties have lost ground on average in the 2024 European elections compared with their performances in the last general election in their respective country and that such decline was visible in both Eastern and Western European countries. On average, the populist radical right has made progress across both regions: +1.4 percentage points in CEE countries and +0.9 percentage points in Western Europe, again bearing in mind that there was substantial variation in party performances within each region. Finally, the data show that extreme right-wing ultra-nationalist movements have made gains in Eastern Europe, winning an additional 1.8 percentage points on average on their previous performance in the last general election.

Overall, with all limitations in mind, the data do not show a clear regional divide in terms of populist party performances in the 2024 European elections but rather point to the diversity of populist manifestations and variation of their electoral performances within each region. At the country level, the German case illustrates a more striking regional pattern as all three populist parties were much more successful in the eastern states, reflecting the multi-faceted legacy of the GDR and the political impact of the shock and aftermath of the transformation in the 1990s.



## Diverse drivers of populism in the EP elections 2024

Across Europe, the popularity of populist movements is rooted in the ‘polycrisis’ to which EU citizens have been exposed since 2008 – the financial crisis, the 2015 refugee crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic and now the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. Fidesz’s electoral slogan, ‘No migration, no gender, no war!’ succinctly captures the division lines not only between populists and non-populists but also among populists from the left, the centre, and the right and even within those subcategories. In Austria, the polycrisis amalgam was perfectly summed up by the FPÖ’s slogan in the run-up to the vote: ‘Stop European chaos, the asylum crisis, climate terror, warmongering and Corona chaos’. In Italy, the multiple crises have led to increased opposition to the EU. In France, since 2012, support for the RN has been fuelled by feelings of economic alienation mediated by cultural concerns over immigration and strong anti-elite sentiments.

However, this polycrisis has played out differently in each country. Belgium illustrates such differences: the political debate in Flanders saw more focus on migration, law and order and public finances, whereas, in French-speaking Belgium, the focus was more on energy, civil rights and work. Immigration issues have become more salient in countries such as Cyprus, which is the first country in the EU to move to per capita applications for asylum. This has led to Euroscepticism and discontent in relation to the EU’s management of immigration. In contrast, in Sweden, immigration was less significant than it had been in both the previous European election and the Riksdag election of 2022. In Greece, domestic – rather than European – issues dominated the campaigns, including the economy, inflation and the cost-of-living crisis, with populists both from the right and the left cashing in on economic decline and regional disparities. In Austria, the FPÖ focused on migration, the war in Ukraine, climate change and, notably, the COVID-19 pandemic. Amongst those four, migration was the most important issue in the campaign. In Latvia, populist parties campaigned around the war in Ukraine, the Green Deal and its economic impact, and the defence of traditional family and Christian values, opposing progressive, liberal ideals in Brussels, including LGBTQ+ rights. Opposition to LGBTQ+ rights was typical for most of the radical-right populists, including in Bulgaria, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. LGBTQ+ rights were countered with arguments on religion and traditional family values, including criticisms of political correctness and limiting the freedom of speech. By contrast, some left-populist outfits (such as the Greek

KKE) have been defenders of LGBTQ+ rights and socially progressive in general.

### ***Economic uncertainty as a common driver of populism***

Beyond such variation, the economic context has heavily weighed on public opinion and has fuelled frustration and anger around the rising cost of living in many countries. Economic fears clearly dominated the campaign in France, creating a propitious context for populist politics across the board. The Denmark Democrats have made significant inroads in rural areas where voters feel neglected and left behind. In Germany, the AfD continued to push their core issues — first and foremost immigration, but also the economic impact of the war on Germany, climate denialism and hard Euroscepticism. To the left, populist parties have also politicized the economic crisis. In Ireland, support for Sinn Féin rose in the 2010s as it adopted a more populist approach combined with a strong focus on economic issues. The acuteness of the housing crisis also helped the party. Sinn Féin had campaigned strongly on the housing issue, and it was this that brought it increased support among young progressive voters.

Luxembourg serves as a counterexample here. Public opinion data show that compared to the EU average, Luxembourgers were far more satisfied with their economic situation and the EU, and they felt much better off economically and also had much higher levels of trust in their national government and the EU. The fact that populists enjoyed more support in rural areas and among the less educated in the Czech Republic and Romania, among others, further indicates the importance of economic uncertainty as a driving factor.

### ***Immigration and refugees***

In many cases, the populist radical right has capitalized on insecurities linked to immigration and asylum seekers, which was a key issue in countries such as the Netherlands, Germany, Hungary, Poland and France. Germany had accepted more than a million Ukrainian refugees after the 2022 attack, which brought the issue of immigration back onto the agenda in 2023 after its salience had been low for several years. In France, next to inflation, immigration emerged as the second most salient issue, followed by law and order. In Flanders, the immigration agenda has been particularly favourable to the populist radical parties such as the VB. Immigration represented a key focus for all right-wing populists (EL, FL, and Niki) in Greece. In Austria, The FPÖ rejected the EU's Pact on Migration and Asylum and the mandatory distribution of asylum seekers across the EU, calling instead for a 'Pact on Re-Migration'. In Italy, the populist governing coalition of FdI, Lega, and



Forza Italia prides itself on the migration deal signed with Albania that aims to relocate immigrants arriving in Italy to Italian-operated refugee centres in Albania. The Italian prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, has further succeeded in pushing for EU-wide agreements with North African countries that envision limiting the flow of migrants in exchange for financial assistance.

Immigration issues were also prominent in Eastern and Central European countries. In the Czech Republic, populists from the centre and the right framed migration in security terms, rejecting the EU Pact on Migration, highlighting the so-called “no-go zones” where women are at risk and Islamic minorities have brought crime, terrorism and the domination of Sharia law. In Poland, migration has been a major focus of both PiS and Konfederacja. The influx of refugees from Ukraine has provided fertile ground for populist discourses. While the PiS government had initially embraced Ukrainian refugees, the prolonged war and the sheer number of refugees resulted in a backlash with time and fervent opposition against the EU’s Migration Pact, which was labelled the ‘Trojan horse of Europe’. The governing SMER party in Slovakia has similarly criticized the Pact on Migration and Asylum and opposed compulsory relocation schemes, proposing measures in the country of origin instead.

Such rising salience of immigration issues may account for the decline in support for left-wing populism. In Ireland, for example, the 2024 European Parliament elections came on the back of a rise in the prominence of immigration as an issue. Sinn Féin’s falling support, then, can be seen as the party’s failure to address such issues despite trying to change its discourse on the pressure that recently arrived asylum seekers put on social services. Similarly, in the Netherlands, the inability of the SP to attract economically left-wing and welfare-chauvinist voters may be seen as a consequence of the party’s lack of commitment to an anti-immigrant stance. In Italy, similarly, M5S has lost support also due to its inability to address the migration problem.

### ***Populist polarization over climate change and the green transition***

There has also been a backlash against the European Green Deal, with populist radical-right parties attacking the environmental transition as being “punitive”. Right-wing populist parties’s scepticism about climate change and hostility to low-carbon energy policies has been well documented in the literature (Lockwood and Lockwood, 2022). The recent study by Forchtner and Lubarda (2023) suggests that right-wing populist parties generally claim that climate policies should not harm

the economy and jobs and that such parties most effectively perform as defenders of the nation's economic well-being.

In Flanders, the VB opposes further enlargement and positions itself against the interference of the EU in the national politics of illiberal democracies, as well as against EU policies in terms of climate and agriculture. In Luxembourg, the ADR party has prioritized the preservation of the combustion engine, more generally opposing green politics. The Finns Party has been the Eurosceptic party in Finnish EP elections, promoting an agenda opposed to the EU, immigration and climate change policies. In the Netherlands, the PVV vehemently called for opt-out possibilities for the Netherlands regarding asylum seekers and migration and relaxing obligations with respect to climate change, especially nitrogen. The Austrian FPÖ demands a stop to the European Green Deal, the EU Nature Restoration Law, and the scheduled ban on combustion engines. In Poland, the European Green Deal has been criticized both by PiS and Konfederacja as an ideological project of EU elites aimed against ordinary citizens. Both parties have highlighted the high prices of energy, transport and agriculture to ordinary Poles. The European Green Deal was similarly criticized by right-wing populists in Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania, to name a few.

In contrast, left-wing populist parties have been taking up environmental issues, and they have endorsed an agenda of green transition (Duina and Zhou 2024). Parties such as LFI in France and Podemos in Spain have placed environmental issues at the core of their political platform while blaming political and economic elites for the environmental crisis. In Italy, M5S's electoral platform emphasizes anti-austerity measures, public healthcare defence, anti-corruption efforts, environmental protection, and labour issues, including introducing a minimum wage and a 32-hour workweek. SMER is a notable exception in the left-populist camp, as it has vehemently criticized the Green Deal, labelling it an "extreme environmental initiative" pushed through by "Eurocrats with no accountability" and rejecting the target of reducing emissions by 55% by 2030.

Such a populist divide over climate change is most visible in France, where radical right-wing populist parties such as the RN and Reconquête clearly oppose the European Green Deal and play with climate-sceptic themes to sway voters most affected by the economic cost of the green transition. In contrast, the left-wing populist LFI has adopted an eco-socialist and ambitious green transition agenda, championing the fight against climate change (Chazel and Dain, 2024). We see a





similar divide in Italy: Lega's platform focuses on halting the EU's technocratic and centralizing drift and restoring the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality. Key proposals include rejecting the Green Deal, ending austerity policies and protecting Italian production chains. In contrast, the M5S has put environmental protection and green transition policies at the core of its electoral platform. In Denmark, the left-wing populist SF has spearheaded the call to accelerate decarbonization efforts and implement policies to achieve concrete results quickly, given the urgency of the climate crisis. In contrast, the populist right-wing, led by the DF and the Denmark Democrats, opposed environmental regulations, which they believed would harm the competitiveness of Danish agricultural products in the European market.

In Germany, on the other hand, the government's green transition policies are strongly opposed by populist parties across the board. These parties also sided with large-scale farmers' protests against some cuts to agrarian subsidies that eventually forced a government U-turn. The AfD continued to push climate denialism and hard Euroscepticism. Both AfD and BSW will likely vote against any policies related to the 'green transformation'.

Finally, the ecological divide is found across other types of populism. In the Netherlands, for example, the BBB typically pits ordinary citizens and farmers against 'oat milk cappuccino drinking' city dwellers and unresponsive politicians from the major cities in the west of the country (the so-called Randstad). BBB's core issues centre around support for farmers and opposition to radical climate policies. Similarly, in Romania, the SOS emphasized the protection of farmers and agriculture workers, criticizing EU product regulations, advocating for Romanians' rights to continue using traditional energy sources like firewood and natural gas, and demanding the reopening of coal mines. In the Czech Republic, the European Green Deal has been rejected by both the ANO and the SPD. While ANO accused Brussels of committing ritual suicide, the SPD attacked the reduction of combustion engines by placing a former racing driver at the top of its electoral list.

### ***Gaza and the Israel– Hamas war***

The Israel– Hamas war and the humanitarian crisis in Gaza have provoked diametrically opposed reactions among populists from across the political spectrum. The conflict has featured much more prominently in political discourse in Western Europe than in Central and Eastern Europe, where the war in Ukraine has taken precedence.

France is a good illustration of such a divide. French lead candidates show deep splits over recognition of a Palestinian state. Left-leaning contenders, from the Communists to the social democrats, are clearly in favour of a ‘two-state solution’, while the French far right, in a break with the past, now supports Israel. Marine Le Pen and RN President Jordan Bardella joined pro-Israeli protests, blaming left-leaning forces for allegedly failing to condemn the 7 October attacks. The LFI, by contrast, has taken a pro-Palestinian position, calling for sanctions against the Israeli government, an embargo on the shipping of weaponry and artillery, an end to the 2000 EU-Israel Association Agreement, and the immediate recognition of a Palestinian state. Mélenchon and members of LFI were accused of antisemitism for declining to condemn Hamas as a terrorist group.

Overall, voters of left-wing forces were more concerned about war in Palestine than Ukraine and were more likely to support the Palestinian cause. This concern was particularly visible among Podemos voters, as well as KKE supporters in Greece. Yet, some right-wing populists have also sided with Palestine and not with Israel, including the Belgian PTB–PVDA and the Irish PBP. Romanian SOS leader Șoșoacă has been accused of antisemitism for her controversial remarks. For instance, during a joint session of parliament dedicated to the Day of Solidarity and Friendship between Romania and Israel in May 2024, Șoșoacă complained that this day should serve to commemorate Romanian martyrs from communist prisons, criticizing what she viewed as an incorrect focus on antisemitism. She protested that Romania saved over 400,000 Jews during the Second World War. Vazrazhdane’s leader, Kostadin Kostadinov, has also been highly critical of Israel, although acknowledging the terrorist attack of Hamas and advocating for a two-state solution.

Other right-wing populists have firmly defended Israel. Chega claimed that Netanyahu’s government was entitled to ‘neutralize the threat’ and was the only parliamentary party to decline to join calls for a ceasefire. In Germany, a knife attack by an Afghan man left a police officer dead just days before the election, triggering a fresh debate about immigration, Islamism and the longstanding policy against deportations to Afghanistan. The anti-Islam stance was also important for the Czech SPD, which has been a stalwart defender of Israel.

### ***Ukraine and Russia***

The outbreak of the war in Ukraine resulted in diverse responses by populist parties. Many populists on the right, especially in Western Europe, initially distanced themselves from Putin and cooled off their usual pro-Russian stance.



Others, on the contrary, became even more pro-Russian (Ivaldi and Zankina, 2023). Such diversity can be explained by specific geostrategic and historical factors, including geographical proximity to Russia, past conflicts, cultural proximity or trade relations.

Some of the most vehement defenders of Russia in the West have been the AfD and FPÖ, which have denounced their respective governments' support for Kyiv, accusing them of 'warmongering'. The AfD has a longstanding association with Russia, repeatedly voicing sympathy for Putin and his regime. Although the party toned down its statements immediately after the February 2022 attack, it has since highlighted the economic consequences of the war and the sanctions for Germany, reinventing itself as a party of "peace", even adopting the classic dove symbol. The BSW took an even more pro-Russian stance than the AfD, with its leader Wagenknecht routinely claiming that the US and the collective Western block a peace agreement between Russia and Ukraine for reasons of their own. BSW's 20-page manifesto mentions sanctions 14 times, depicting them as harmful to Germany while having no effect on Russia itself. The FPÖ criticized the EU's support for Kyiv, calling for an immediate end to financial and military aid to Ukraine and abolishing sanctions against Russia due to their detrimental effects on the economy. The Austrian government, in turn, was criticized for a breach of the country's constitutional obligation of neutrality. The Dutch FvD has also propagated a pro-Russia and pro-Putin line, as did the Swedish SD. SD's leader Åkesson stated that there is an upper limit to how much support Sweden should give to Ukraine, while the party's top candidate, Charlie Weimers, suggested that their own party group, ECR, should be open to cooperating with parties in the ID group, whose stance on Russia has been characterized as relatively friendly. The Irish PBP has taken positions that are less in tune with popular opinion and are often seen as pro-Russian, including calls for Ukraine to enter peace talks.

Putin has enjoyed even more support in Central and Eastern Europe, including in Hungary, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Orbán's campaign made the war in Ukraine its centrepiece. He used fear-mongering to build a Manichean narrative where anybody failing to vote for Fidesz was part of the 'pro-war' camp, accusing the Hungarian opposition of carrying out the demands of its international financiers in Brussels and Washington. Orbán repeatedly blamed the EU for wrongdoing and claimed that because of the incompetent leadership in Brussels, 'instead of peace, we have war, instead of security we have a rule-of-law ruckus, instead of prosperity we have financial blackmail'. The Bulgarian Vazrazhdane and

its leader, Kostadin Kostadinov, have been stark defenders of Putin to the extent of reaching comical proportions. Kostadinov is widely known in the country as ‘kopeikin’, referring to the Russian coin currency. His rallies feature more Russian than Bulgarian national flags. He frequently travels to Moscow, and his party is known to be funded by Putin (Zankina, 2024). The Czech SPD has become one of the most vocal anti-Ukrainian voices following Russia’s 2022 invasion, as did the newly emerged SOS in Romania. SOS’s leader Şoşoacă was declared ‘Personality of the Year’ in 2021 by Sputnik. She asserted that Europeans and Americans aim to destroy Russia and argued that Ukraine illegally occupies territories, including some that rightfully belong to Romania. The left-populist SMER in Slovakia, in turn, has called for a halt of all military assistance to Ukraine in its defence against Russian aggression and for a more neutral stance toward Russia. SMER blamed the EU for ‘prolonging war in Europe’ by supporting Ukraine.

In contrast to such support for Putin, a number of parties across Europe have adopted a pro-Ukraine position. In Finland, for example, support for Ukraine has been almost unanimous, including by the Finns Party, which has criticized Putin’s Russia, expressing strong support for Ukraine. Similarly, the Danish People’s Party and the Denmark’s Democrats are declaredly pro-Ukraine. In Portugal, Chega also aligned with most mainstream parties, adopting a pro-Ukraine position. The Croatian DP has expressed firm solidarity with Ukraine and the Ukrainian people, drawing parallels between Croatia’s Homeland War (1991–1991) and Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. Although Sinn Féin has often blamed the West for being unnecessarily aggressive toward Putin, with the invasion of Ukraine, the party stood firmly behind Ukraine, although it continued to abstain on aid packages in the EP.

Many parties struggled to take a clear stance, expressing ambiguous positions. The RN, for example, has significantly moderated its attitude. Le Pen said her only ‘red line’ on Ukraine was stopping France from becoming a ‘co-belligerent’ in the conflict via the use of long-range French missiles against targets on Russian soil. French far-right leader Jordan Bardella said he backed Ukraine’s right to defend itself against Russia, but if elected prime minister, he would not provide Kyiv with missiles that would allow it to strike Russia’s territory. He also said he would stand by France’s commitments to NATO if he became prime minister. In Germany, the Left’s manifesto for the European elections also reflected ambiguity.

On the one hand, the document is highly critical of the US and NATO and even claims that the eastern enlargement of NATO has “contributed to the crisis”. On the



other, it highlights Ukraine's right to self-defence, condemns the attack as a war crime, and demands the withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukrainian territory. The Dutch PVV supported the strengthening of defence, however, without singling out Russia as the main threat. Populists in Latvia took similarly ambivalent positions on Russia. S! refused to blame Russia for the invasion, arguing instead for 'peace'. The LPV initially denounced Russia's invasion of Ukraine but subsequently softened its stance, advocating for the need for negotiations, peace and the renewal of economic relations with Russia – a position also adopted by SV, which primarily appeals to Russian speakers. The Romanian AUR has taken nuanced positions. While denouncing Russia's interference as a significant obstacle to unification with Moldova, the party also criticizes Ukrainian discrimination against ethnic minorities, particularly Romanians.

## Multiple Factors of populist performances across EU member states

As the individual chapters illustrate, beyond differences in issue salience across countries, there were a variety of political factors that may account for differences in populist party electoral performances in the 2024 European elections.

### *National cycle*

Such performances may be first related to the location of the EP elections in each country's national political cycle. The analysis in this report corroborates studies that show that party performances in European elections are mediated by the time of these elections in the national electoral cycle, that government parties lose support in EU elections, especially during the midterm of a national parliamentary cycle, and that opposition parties may benefit from this (Hix and Marsh 2007).

In Germany, the 2024 European election saw devastating results for the governing coalition of the Social Democrats (SPD), Greens, and Liberal Democrats (FDP). The so-called "progressive coalition" and its policies have been deeply unpopular, and the radical-right AfD was the main beneficiary of this discontent. In France, political protest and anti-incumbent sentiments were key to populist voting across the spectrum: over two-thirds of RN voters said they essentially voted to manifest their opposition to the President and the Government, and it was 53% among LFI voters. In the Netherlands, the results of the 2024 European elections for populist parties in the Netherlands were intimately related to the fall of the Rutte IV government in the Summer of 2023 and the outcome of the subsequent



national elections on 22 November 2023, which saw a rise in support for the PVV. In Poland, the governing coalition, which managed to take power away from PiS in 2023, saw a decline in its support. While PiS lost 12 MEP seats, it did regain some of its support compared to the 2023 national election. In Slovakia, SMER, which managed to take back power from OĽaNO in the 2023 national election, lost some of its support in the EP elections, coming second after the liberal Progressive Slovakia (PS). In Hungary, while Fidesz won the elections, it lost some support and faced an unprecedented challenge by a new political party that reshuffled the power balance in the opposition.

The country chapters also find evidence of another key element of the ‘second order’ model that has been applied to European elections since the early 1980s, which is that voters typically make judgements about national political issues in those elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). In many countries, the 2024 European elections were fought over domestic rather than European issues and populist parties often played the national card. In Spain, for example, the number and relevance of ongoing national-level political issues often sidelined European ones during the 2024 campaign. In Portugal, Chega’s manifesto proposals were mostly domestic; European-level proposals were scarce despite a broader media agenda focused on European immigration, defence and EU enlargement. In Germany, domestic actors and attitudes dominated the campaign, with only a minority of populist voters saying that “Europe” was more important for their decision than “Germany”, particularly AfD supporters who were more inward-looking and more Eurosceptic than the BSW’s. In Greece, domestic issues dominated, with election results representing an anti-government protest vote. This was also the case in the Czech Republic, where many voters supported populist parties out of frustration with national politics and the government’s performance.

The European elections further coincided with national and local elections in Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Hungary, Italy, Ireland, Malta and Romania. The 2024 elections in Belgium were a triple election for the European, federal and regional levels. In this context, European elections were clearly second-order elections. In Bulgaria, the elections coincided with early national elections (the sixth in two years). Thus, European issues were subsumed by overall political instability and infighting, polarizing discourse and a record-low voter turnout.

### ***Populists in government***

Populists in government have had varying success in the 2024 European elections.



While the FdL in Italy managed to maintain its dominance, including within the governing coalition, the Finns Party saw a sharp drop in support due to its participation in government. While Fidesz maintained its grip on power, it was challenged by a new opposition party, losing two seats in the EP.

In Italy, all the parties in the centre-right governing coalition (FdI, FI, Lega) improved their results compared to the 2022 general elections, thus enjoying a “honeymoon” period of the government elected two years before, reflecting a consolidation of the approval of the Meloni government at the domestic level. Meloni was heavily involved in the European campaign, enabling her party to benefit from her relatively intact popularity as the head of government since September 2022. In Croatia, the right-wing populist DP was already in the position of kingmaker after coming third in the national parliamentary elections in April 2024 and becoming part of the governing coalition. In the EP elections, the DP maintained its support, thus reaffirming its leverage in domestic and European politics.

Elsewhere, populists in government lost ground. In Hungary, despite Fidesz’s victory in the election, a new challenger, Tisza, posed significant challenges, attracting former Fidesz party member Péter Magyar and gaining seven seats in the EP, while Fidesz lost two. Although Fidesz came in first in the EP elections with 44.82% of the votes, the result was considered the party’s worst performance in an EP election. In Finland, the Finns Party paid for its participation in the government and fell back sharply, losing 6 points compared to 2019. The elections revealed voters’ deep distrust towards the government, in which the Finns Party had supported significant austerity measures and cuts to public spending through its leader and finance minister, Riikka Purra. In Sweden, the 2024 European Parliament election was the first election in which the Sweden Democrats participated while having formal influence over the government. The party performed the worst in mobilizing voters in the week leading up to the election, and its support for the centre-right government could possibly explain such an electoral setback.

### ***Political discontent as a driver of populist voting***

In countries where populists were in the opposition, these parties benefited from political discontent with national governments dealing with the aftermath of the pandemic, the energy and high inflation crisis, and the many political and economic ramifications of the war in Ukraine.

In Spain, Vox’s electoral campaign was essentially framed as a referendum against

Sánchez. In France, both the RN and LFI sought to capitalize on political discontent by making the election a referendum for or against Emmanuel Macron and the government. In Belgium, populist radical parties, both left and right, positioned themselves as political outsiders and presented themselves as the alternative vote to an unpopular federal government. In Cyprus, ELAM strongly campaigned against corruption, entering the political scene as the new political force that would hold traditional parties accountable. In Portugal, Chega's leader, André Ventura, nominated himself as 'the real leader of the opposition'. In Germany, after the initial rally-round-the-flag effect following Russia's fresh attack on Ukraine, the government's popularity began to decline as a result of high inflation and worries about (energy) security, resulting in a protest vote in favour of populist actors such as the AfD and BSW.

Similarly, in Greece, there was a strong anti-government protest vote, with the key message of the election being political discontent and a general feeling of economic malaise. In Poland, PiS (now in opposition) criticized the government's opposing measures to stop illegal migration adopted by the previous PiS government. In Romania, AUR has criticized the government and mainstream parties for being subservient to the EU and betraying national interests. In an interview for a Russian newspaper, the leader of the more radical SOS party declared that Romania is essentially a 'colony within the EU'.

### ***Populist competition***

Another factor of varying populist performances was changes in the populist political scene across Europe and new patterns of competition between populists. The recent wave of populism has seen new parties challenge the more established players (Ivaldi, 2023). Such divisions began to appear in countries such as Austria and France in the late 1990s, and more recently, populist competition has been observed in a number of European countries but in different configurations.

While countries such as the Netherlands, Germany, France, Bulgaria and Italy have a variety of populist actors distributed across the political spectrum, there has also been an increasing fragmentation of the populist right in a number of countries in recent years, with two or three of those parties competing with one another for votes, possibly affecting the balance of forces within that party family.

Such a split of the populist right is illustrated in Spain, which has seen the emergence of a new populist radical-right party, Se Acabó La Fiesta (SALF), competing with Vox, which partly accounts for the latter's loss of support in the



2024 EP elections when compared with the 2023 general elections. In the Netherlands, there has been an increase in parties competing for the populist vote, forcing these parties to profile themselves not only vis-à-vis mainstream parties but also each other. In Poland, the PiS lost 12 points and 8 seats in five years, suffering from competition from Confederation (Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość), which established itself at the heart of the Polish right. In Hungary, Orbán's party is facing competition from the far-right Our Homeland Movement (MHM). In Romania, AUR is competing for votes with the splinter party SOS. France now has two electorally relevant populist radical-right parties competing with one another, namely, Marine Le Pen's RN and Éric Zemmour's Reconquête! In Germany, the AfD is also facing competition on its left flank from the Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW) on similar anti-immigration policies. In Denmark, the recently formed Denmark's Democrats compete directly with the Danish People's Party. As one final example, in Italy, there has been a clear shift in the balance of power between the Lega and FdI, with Meloni's party taking over the right-wing bloc.

While populist competition essentially concerns the populist right, Ireland provides an interesting case of populist competition to the left of the political spectrum. As the Irish chapter shows, Aontú was in a position to soak up some of Sinn Féin's collapsing coalition, and it did so by calling more clearly for controls on immigration and by opposing the EU migration pact.

### *Political profile and candidates*

Other factors of variations in populist party performances in the 2024 European elections may be found in the political profile of those parties and lead candidates, as well as in specific campaign events that may have dampened or increased support for those parties.

While some of those parties have taken a path towards normalization, others have maintained a more radical ideology and discourse that may alienate moderate voters. In France, while Le Pen's RN has been continuing its strategy of "de-demonization" in order to achieve governmental credibility and detoxify its far-right reputation, Zemmour's Reconquête has come closer to the old extreme right. In Bulgaria, GERB has been moderating its populist appeal, while Vazrazhdane has bet on increasing polarization and extreme right-wing and populist rhetoric. In Ireland, Sinn Féin has transitioned to become a more credible party of government, taking more mainstream positions on a number of issues. In Italy, despite their historical roots in the neo-fascist milieu, Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia have successfully

achieved their transformation into a party of government, taking over Forza Italia's role as the dominant party within the right-wing bloc. As discussed earlier, other parties, such as the Dutch PVV and the Sweden Democrats, have recently undergone a modernization process to increase their coalition potential and increasingly win over the moderate electorate.

In countries like Spain and Finland, on the other hand, the campaign of the 2024 European elections was dominated by public concerns over the rise of the far right in Europe and its possible impact on future alliances in the European Parliament. In Finland, in particular, people's fear of the rising far right in Europe was a salient theme in campaign debates, which may have contributed to diminished electoral support for the Finns Party.

As clearly illustrated in the country chapters, the choice of lead candidates in the 2024 European elections somewhat reflected such variation in the political pedigree of populist parties. In Denmark, for example, the DF nominated hardliner and former MEP Morten Messerschmidt despite his being still under investigation for fraud in the so-called MELD and FELD case concerning the misuse of EU funds. In Germany, the controversies surrounding the party's 're-migration' project and Maximilian Krah's statements about the SS clearly outraged some voters. In Italy, the Lega's campaign was further stirred by the controversial candidacy of General Vannacci, known for his homophobic, racist and sexist comments. In Portugal, Chega's lead candidate, António Tãnger Corrêa, was strongly criticized for endorsing conspiracy theories such as the 'great replacement' and for his using of antisemitic tropes, like accusing the Mossad of forewarning American Jews of terrorist attacks on 9/11. In Finland, the most successful Finns Party candidate, Sebastian Tynkkynen, represented the provocative and radical faction of the party. Another example of strong populist rhetoric and style is found in Romania, where former AUR leader and now a member of SOS Romania, Diana Șoșoacă, is taking her populist rhetoric to new extremes by using tough homophobic, ultra-nationalist, xenophobic and anti-European messages.

Finally, we should mention specific events that may have altered the course of the 2024 elections. One such example is the failed assassination attempt on Prime Minister Robert Fico of SMER, which took place in mid-May 2024, shocking the country and impacting the campaign and elections both directly and indirectly, as both SMER and SNS blamed the opposition and independent media for the attempt, claiming it resulted from a polarized political environment allegedly created by them.





At times, political scandals punctuated the 2024 EP election campaign. In Sweden, the election campaign took a new turn when, about a month prior to the election, it was revealed that the SD’s communications department was hosting a so-called troll factory in which anonymous social media accounts were spreading disinformation and derogatory portrayals of other politicians.

## Populist parties and groups in the European Parliament

The 2024 European elections have delivered a new European Parliament whose centre of gravity has clearly shifted to the right and where the presence of populist actors has increased.

The mainstream forces of the European Parliament – the EPP, S&D, and Renew – have maintained a majority with just over 55% of the seats in the new parliament. The conservative right united within the EPP and reaffirmed its dominance within the European institutions, both in the EP and the Council, with 11 seats compared to only 4 for the left and 5 for Renew. Despite the economic crisis, the European left was unable to establish itself as an alternative force during the election. Finally, the Greens and Renew’s liberals emerged as the big losers of the June 2024 elections, with 53 and 77 seats, respectively, a sharp decline compared to 2019 (70 and 98 seats, respectively) (see Table 3).

Table 3. Political groups in the European Parliament as of July 2024

Political groups	Number of seats	Share of seats (%)
EPP-Group of the European People’s Party (Christian Democrats)	188	26.11
S&D-Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament	136	18.89
PfE-Patriots for Europe	84	11.67
ECR-European Conservatives and Reformists Group	78	10.83
Renew Europe-Renew Europe Group	77	10.69
Greens/EFA-Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance	53	7.36
The Left-The Left group in the European Parliament-GUE/NGL	46	6.39
ESN-Europe of Sovereign Nations	25	3.47
NA-Non-attached Members	33	4.58

Source: European Parliament (<https://results.elections.europa.eu/en/european-results/2024-2029/>)

Following the elections, the centre of gravity of the new parliament shifted to the right. In addition to the strong performances of conservative parties, the European election results confirmed the anticipated rise of populist and Eurosceptic

right-wing parties.

However, these parties remain divided in the European Parliament, where they are currently distributed across three different groups – namely, the ECR (78 seats), PflE (49), and ESN (25), which have replaced the two previous right-wing populist groups, i.e., ECR and Identity and Democracy. Some populist parties are also found among the Non-attached (NA) (see Table 4).

Table 4. Populist parties by political groups in the 2024 European Parliament

Country	Type	Party		Seats won	% of vote	EP Group
<b>Bulgaria</b>	Centrist	Ima takav narod	ITN	1	6.20	ECR
<b>Croatia</b>	Extreme Right	Domovinski pokret	DP	1	8.84	ECR
<b>Cyprus</b>	Extreme Right	Ethniko Laiko Metopo	ELAM	1	11.19	ECR
<b>Denmark</b>	Radical Right	Danmarksdemokraterne	DD	1	7.39	ECR
<b>Estonia</b>	Radical Right	Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond	EKRE	1	14.86	ECR
<b>Finland</b>	Radical Right	Perussuomalaiset/Finns	PS/Finns	1	7.60	ECR
<b>Greece</b>	Radical Right	Elliniki Lysi	EL	2	9.30	ECR
<b>Italy</b>	Radical Right	Fratelli d'Italia	Fdi	24	28.76	ECR
<b>Luxembourg</b>	Right	Alternativ Demokratesch Reformpartei (Alternative Democratic Reform Party)	ADR	1	11.76	ECR
<b>Poland</b>	Radical Right	Prawo i Sprawiedliwość	PiS	20	36.16	ECR
<b>Romania</b>	Radical Right	Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor	AUR	6	14.95	ECR
<b>Sweden</b>	Radical Right	Sverigedemokraterna	SD	3	13.19	ECR
<b>Bulgaria</b>	Centrist	Graždani za evropsko razvitie na Bălgarija	GERB	5	24.30	EPP
<b>Italy</b>	Right	Forza Italia	FI	8	9.58	EPP
<b>Netherlands</b>	Centrist	BoerBurgerBeweging	BBB	2	5.40	EPP
<b>Slovenia</b>	Radical Right	Slovenska demokratska stranka	SDS	4	30.65	EPP
<b>Bulgaria</b>	Extreme Right	Vazrazhdane	Vazrazhdane	3	14.40	ESN
<b>Czech Republic</b>	Radical Right	Svoboda a přímá demokracie	SPD	1	5.73	ESN
<b>France</b>	Radical Right	Reconquête!	REC	5	5.46	ESN



<b>Germany</b>	Radical Right	Alternative für Deutschland	AfD	15	15.89	ESN
<b>Hungary</b>	Extreme Right	Mi Hazánk Mozgalom	MHM	1	6.75	ESN
<b>Lithuania</b>	Extreme Right	Tautos ir teisingumo sąjunga (The People and Justice Union)	TTS	1	5.45	ESN
<b>Poland</b>	Extreme Right	Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość	Konf	3	3,19	ESN
<b>Slovakia</b>	Extreme Right	Hnutie Republika	Hnutie Republika	2	12.53	ESN
<b>Germany</b>	Left	Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht	BSW	6	6.17	NA
<b>Greece</b>	Radical Right	Dimokratikó Patriotikó Kínima	NIKI	1	4.37	NA
<b>Greece</b>	Left	Plefsi Eleftherias	PE	1	3.40	NA
<b>Greece</b>	Left	Kommounistiko Komma Elladas	KKE	2	9.30	NA
<b>Poland</b>	Extreme Right	Nowa Nadzieja	Nowa Nadzieja	2	2.79	NA
<b>Poland</b>	Extreme Right	Ruch Narodowy	Ruch Narodowy	1	2.57	NA
<b>Romania</b>	Radical Right	S.O.S. România	SOS RO	2	5.04	NA
<b>Slovakia</b>	Left	SMER – sociálna demokracia	SMER-SD	5	24.77	NA
<b>Spain</b>	Radical Right	Se Acabó La Fiesta	SALF	3	4.59	NA
<b>Austria</b>	Radical Right	Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs	FPÖ	6	25.36	PfE
<b>Belgium</b>	Radical Right	Vlaams Belang	VB	3	22.94	PfE
<b>Czech Republic</b>	Centrist	Akce nespokojených občanů	ANO 2011	7	26.14	PfE
<b>Czech Republic</b>	Radical Right	Přísaha a Motoristé	Přísaha a Motoristé	2	10.26	PfE
<b>Denmark</b>	Radical Right	Dansk Folkeparti	DF	1	6.37	PfE
<b>France</b>	Radical Right	Rassemblement national	RN	30	31.47	PfE
<b>Greece</b>	Radical Right	Foni Logikis	FL	1	3.04	PfE
<b>Hungary</b>	Radical Right	Fidesz-Magyar Polgári Szövetség	Fidesz	11	44.69	PfE
<b>Italy</b>	Radical Right	Lega	Lega	8	8.98	PfE
<b>Latvia</b>	Radical Right	Latvija pirmajā vietā	LPV	1	6.23	PfE

<b>Netherlands</b>	Radical Right	Partij voor de Vrijheid	PVV	6	16.97	PfE
<b>Portugal</b>	Radical Right	Chega	Chega	2	9.79	PfE
<b>Spain</b>	Radical Right	Vox	Vox	6	9.63	PfE
<b>Bulgaria</b>	Centrist	Prodalzhavame Promjanata-Democraticzna Bulgaria	PP-BD	2	14.45	Renew (PP)
<b>Belgium</b>	Left	Parti du Travail de Belgique-Partij van de arbeid	PTB–PVDA	2	11.76	The Left
<b>Denmark</b>	Left	Enhedslisten – De Rød-Grønne	Enhl., Ø	1	7.04	The Left
<b>France</b>	Left	La France Insoumise	LFI	9	9.87	The Left
<b>Germany</b>	Left	Die Linke	Die Linke	3	2.74	The Left
<b>Greece</b>	Left	Synaspismós Rizospastikís Aristerás	SYRIZA	4	14.92	The Left
<b>Ireland</b>	Left	Sinn Féin	SF	2	11.14	The Left
<b>Italy</b>	Centrist	Movimento 5 Stelle	M5S	8	9.98	The Left
<b>Spain</b>	Left	Podemos	Podemos	2	3.28	The Left
<b>Sweden</b>	Left	Vänsterpartiet	V	2	11.04	The Left

Source: Compiled by the authors based on election results data from the European Parliament (<https://results.elections.europa.eu/en/>). Notes: Blue indicates radical-right populist; red radical-left populist; and grey, centrist populist.

Such a reconfiguration of populist groups in the EP reflects a wide array of factors, from national and geopolitical issues to party strategies and political profiles and mutual populist exclusion. The case of Hungarian Fidesz illustrates such complexity. Despite one of the most significant victories across the EU, Orbán's party faced the challenge of allying with others on the European scene. Initially, Orbán strived to join Meloni's ECR but ultimately rejected this option to avoid coalescing with the anti-Hungarian AUR in Romania. Additionally, there was a cleavage on the Russia-Ukraine War with Meloni and Jarosław Kaczyński but also smaller members of the ECR from Finland, Latvia and Lithuania, holding diametrically opposed views to Orbán's. After weeks of negotiations, Orbán succeeded in forming a new coalition based on the former Identity and Democracy group, initially with the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) and the Czech ANO, which was ultimately led by the French National Rally (RN). Although the new Patriots for Europe (PfE) group is the third-largest faction in the European Parliament, it could not secure any significant positions, and thus, Fidesz's political isolation continues.

Along with the new PfE and previous ECR groups, other right-wing populist



parties have found political shelter in the newly formed Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN) group. These are essentially extreme right-wing parties such as Our Homeland in Hungary, Reconquête! in France, Hnutie Republika in Slovakia, the Bulgarian Vazrazhdane and Czech SPD. The German AfD leads the group following its expulsion from the former Identity and Democracy faction in the EP in the lead-up to the European elections in May 2024, which was the result of the controversial statements made by the AfD's lead candidate Maximilian Krah about members of the Nazi SS. The ESN currently has 25 members in the EP.

With a few notable exceptions, such as Fico's SMER in Slovakia and the German BSW, parties of the populist left are all found in the Left group in the European Parliament. The Left currently has 46 seats, which represents a slight increase on its previous share of 37 seats in the outgoing parliament. After talks of creating a new group with the German BSW, the Italian M5S has joined the European Left, which, as the country analysis has shown, is consistent with the ideological and strategic move to the left by the party in Italian politics.

Finally, somewhat reflecting the diversity in their ideological profile, centrist populist parties are scattered across different groups. The Czech ANO has joined the new populist radical-right PfiE along with Orbán's Fidesz in Hungary and Le Pen's RN in France. Other centrist populists, such as the Dutch BBB and GERB in Bulgaria, are found in the right-wing conservative EPP, while the Bulgarian ITN has joined Meloni's ECR. ANO's decision to leave the liberal Renew group and join the PfiE alongside Fidesz and FPÖ poses a curious example. Since the PfiE has been excluded from the allocation of posts in the EP committees and subject to cordon sanitaire by the EP majority, ANO is likely to have much less leverage in the new European Parliament.

## The impact of populism on EU politics

With the increased representation of right-wing populists in the European Parliament, we can expect a growing impact on the political debate and policy decisions. We have already seen such impact in areas such as migration policy, where the ECR and the ID have already left their mark with policies on outsourcing immigration control through a series of agreements with neighbouring nations, particularly in Northern Africa, and with the securitization of the migration debate, framing it as a security threat with a primary focus on border control and



deportations, as opposed an effective system of burden-sharing and protection of human rights for refugees and asylum seekers.

Climate change is another area where we may see rollback and obstructionism. Although the Green Deal has been finalized, implementation may be at risk, particularly in areas such as phasing out combustion engines, restoration of nature reserves and green energy investment. Such rollback is likely to impede the ability of the EU to act as a global leader in what is pronouncedly a transnational policy issue.

EU enlargement is another topic that may take the backseat, both when it comes to the Western Balkans, as well as Ukraine. Parties such as PVV, RN, FPÖ and AfD are strongly opposing further enlargement, as are many of the right-wing populists in Central and Eastern Europe. Exceptions are PiS and AUR and their support for EU membership for Ukraine and Moldova, respectively, due to historical and ethnic factors.

Foreign policy is expected to be a point of major contention for the far right in the EP, although the expected impact may be overestimated, at least in the short term. The 19 September 2024 resolution adopted by the European Parliament on lifting the restrictions on the use of Western weapons systems delivered to Ukraine against legitimate military targets on Russian territory presents a case in point. The resolution was passed with 425 votes in favour, 131 against and 63 abstentions. The EP majority, including the EPP, S&D, and Renew Europe, voted in support, with additional support from many members of the Green/EFA and the ECR. Dissenting voices came from the PfiE and the ESN, but also from ECR's FdI, as well as French leftists and Irish, Austrian and Maltese MEPs across the political spectrum reflecting their countries' neutral (non-NATO) status.

The impact of the populist left is likely to have a more limited impact, given its modest representation, although there may be issues where we may see the populist left and right coalesce, such as the war in Ukraine, for example, or aspects of welfare policy. The BSW is a good illustration of this merging of left and right populism on specific policy topics.

The reconfiguration of the extreme right in the European Parliament reaffirms prior tendencies and analysis (i.e., that despite the increased representation of radical-right actors, they continue to be divided and unable to act as a united front). Hence, we can expect more ad hoc coalitions on specific issues rather than



united positions and policy proposals. What should not be neglected, although, is the legitimization of the radical-right discourse and its impact on both European and domestic politics. We have clearly seen this effect in Austria, where after winning the EP elections, the FPÖ increased its support even more, winning the national legislative elections. While the current EP majority may be able to effectively exercise *cordon sanitaire* over both the far right and the far left, an overall shift to the right, both in terms of rhetoric and policy, is already a reality. This prolonged tendency has the potential to contribute to the future growth of the far right in the subsequent European Parliament, as well as to the continued mainstreaming of far-right policies, as the current majority is trying to push through its priorities. The inclusion of Raffaele Fitto (FdI-ECR) as the Executive Vice-President for Cohesion and Reforms in the new European Commission signals such a tendency and is but one instance of attempts to draw the ECR closer.

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