

# European Elections: What Will Be the Key Issues for European Voters?

Given the dynamic geopolitical developments, the 2024 European elections and their potential outcomes are of great importance for the future of the Old Continent. The growing protests by farmers and agriculturalists in Europe against European policies show that the agenda of the people and that of the European institutions may not be the same. Although the sentiment of solidarity and the professing of values is not lost in Europe, we are increasingly seeing disagreement with the Union's policies. These developments will open the way for populism and populist formations, which are likely to gain serious support from European voters.

The existence of an unresolved social and political issue immediately before a scheduled election for an institution runs a huge risk of distorting even the most thorough opinion polls and is often a harbinger to the emergence of new political actors. When a crisis situation forms, it can distort the political process and provoke either voter passivity or a punitive vote, which certainly changes habitual attitudes and leads to surprises

and discrepancies between polls and results. There is currently a wave of protests that is cumulating energy around itself and could attract new voters who could rearrange the political map. Depending on whether and how the European institutions manage the unresolved issues before the elections, there could be one result or another after the elections.

The European Parliament is an institution that reflects not only pan-European sentiments but also national politics. In many Member States there is a process of stratification of political entities, the emergence of new ones, including those with undefined ideologies, which are still unpositioned on the European political scene.

The attempt to predict the future choices of European citizens should go through a very careful reading and analysis of the constantly changing map of the newly emerging protest movements in the Member States. In this respect, protests such as those of the grain growers and farmers could seriously predict both the turnout for the European elections and the results of the elections themselves. For the old political formations, there will be the serious question of how to mobilise their electorates. In general, crisis situations stimulate civic activism by voting both in favour of a particular force and punitively against another. The question of what kind of Europe Europe's citizens want has no clear answer at all. Whether voters trust European institutions and the EP's ability to

steer European policy has a direct impact on turnout.

## What are we voting for?

In the upcoming elections, which will take place between 6 and 9 June 2024, European citizens will have the opportunity to elect their representatives to the European Parliament. Its work is crucial in terms of the decisions it takes and the legislation it adopts shaping EU policy.

### Main functions of the Parliament:

- ⇒ Debates legislation
- ⇒ Passes or rejects laws, and can introduce amendments (though not in all cases)
- ⇒ Supervises the institutions and budgets of the Union

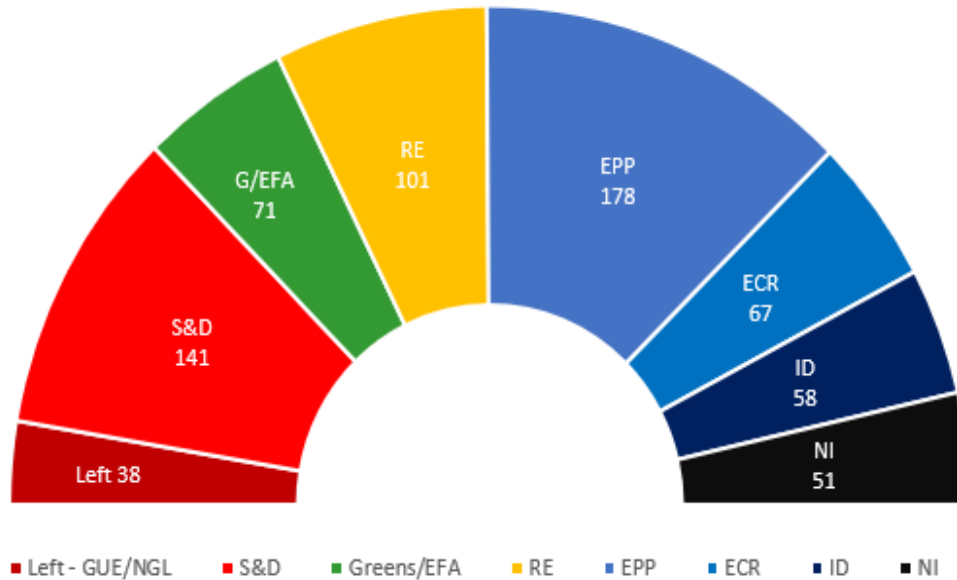
## Configurations of the EP

European Parliament elections are held every five years. Member states are allocated seats according to their population, with the number of seats per country ranging from 6 to 96, out of a total of 705 in the current parliamentary configuration and 720 in the next one.

The last elections to the European Parliament were held in 2019, when the EPP group

won the most seats in the Parliament which has been a recurring trend since 1999, but its share was reduced compared to past results. The trend of erosion in support for the EPP and S&D, the so-called "Grand Coalition", and the corresponding political climate, has resulted in the following configuration of the European Parliament that is in place today:

## Configuration of the European Parliament as of February 2024

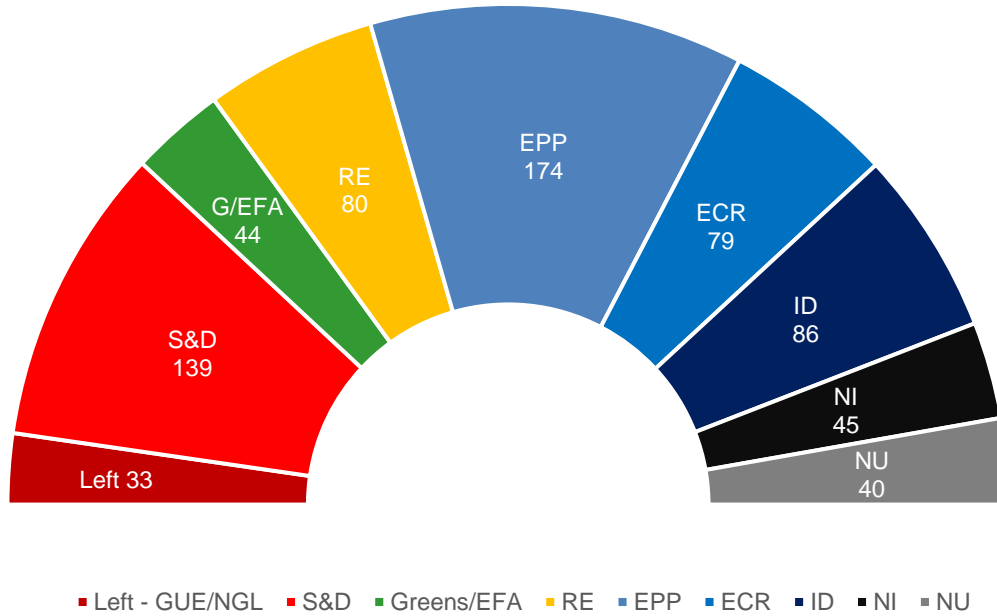


Tracking the registered roll-call votes in the European Parliament in its current configuration, it is striking that different coalitions tend to dominate different areas of European politics. For example, a coalition made up of the centrist EPP and S&D, often with support from Renew Europe, usually prevails on issues relating to budgets, budgetary control, culture and education, economic and monetary affairs, foreign affairs, external market and consumer protection, legal affairs, transport and tourism.

On the other hand, the coalition of centre-left political groups, comprising S&D, Renew Europe, Greens/EFA and the Left, usually prevails on civil liberties, justice, home affairs, development, employment, social affairs, the environment, women's rights and gender equality. In contrast, the coalition made up of centre-right groups (EPP,

Renew Europe, ECR and sometimes ID) usually prevails in areas such as agriculture, rural development, fisheries, industry, research and international trade.

## European Parliament seat projection for the next mandate as of February 17<sup>th</sup>



As of February 2024, a POLITICO poll<sup>1</sup> shows that the positions of the EPP and S&D will not undergo much change and the groups will remain first and second in numbers, respectively, albeit with a reduced share due to the increase in the total number of representatives from 705 to 720. The Identity and Democracy (ID) group is placed third, displacing Renew Europe, which, according to the survey, suffered a significant drop and lost 21 seats. Fourth in numbers at the moment

looks set to be the Renew Europe group with a projected 80 seats, followed by ECR with one seat less. The most noticeable loss will be suffered by the Greens/EFA group, which is predicted to lose 27 seats in the next EP mandate, while the Left – GUE/NGL parliamentary group will remain the smallest with five fewer representatives than the current composition. The final allocation of the New Unaligned actors (NUs) to the groups will further shift the landscape of the structure of the

<sup>1</sup> POLITICO. (2024). POLITICO Poll of Polls — European Election polls, trends and election news. POLITICO.

<https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/european-parliament-election/>

next parliament, as it is not yet clear which political group parties such as Hungary's Fidesz, Spain's Sumar and the Bulgarian PP-DB coalition will join.

The results so far show that the current coalitions are likely to be maintained in most districts, at least at the beginning of the next parliamentary term. The centrist grand coalition, even with the support of Renew Europe, is likely to be less dominant on some policy issues due to its smaller size. In particular, on economic and monetary issues as well as on the internal market and consumer protection, the grand coalition is winning votes in the current Parliament by a smaller margin.

With regard to foreign affairs, in particular EU support for Ukraine, the majority in the forthcoming European Parliament is expected to approve the continuation of the financial, logistical and military aid that Western countries have been providing to Kyiv since February 2022, although political groups of far-right formations, such as the ID and ECR, will increase their presence in Parliament.

**Key policies that will be at the centre of the discussion in this campaign:**

- ⇒ Agricultural and Trade policy
- ⇒ Energy Independence and Climate Change
- ⇒ EU Enlargement policy
- ⇒ Migration policy
- ⇒ Security

## Agricultural and Trade policy

In the new programming period up to 2027, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) places greater emphasis on environmental protection and biodiversity. The CAP is now aligned with the objectives of the European Green Pact and should contribute to achieving them. As a result, payments are now linked to stricter requirements. For example, each farm must allocate at least 3% of its arable land to biodiversity and non-productive elements. Overall, around 40% of the CAP budget is allocated to climate-related activities.

The Union's agricultural policy was met with discontent among farmers and growers across Europe. The main problems cited are low farm gate prices, rising production costs, duty-free corridors for Ukrainian grain and food, and the Commission's renewed negotiations to conclude a trade agreement with MERCOSUR (a South American common market between Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay), an agreement that is feared to significantly reduce or eliminate import tariffs altogether, putting European production in an uncompetitive position with South American agricultural imports.

The war in Ukraine, the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the decline in living standards as a result of high inflation have posed major challenges for the world economy and in particular for a region such as Europe that supports huge welfare states. The contraction of the

economy and the need to pursue more conservative economic policies is creating discontent and uncertainty among the people, and the protests by farmers and agriculturalists in Europe are just one expression of this sentiment. Although the agricultural sector is only a small part of the Union's economy, the wave of protest has caused a huge backlash and forced the Commission to back down on some policies and regulations. Green policies burden farmers with harsh regulations and rules, such as the ban on the use of pesticides, without providing an alternative means of crop protection, which makes production more expensive and creates the need to review policy in this sector.

## Energy Independence and Climate Change

The debate on the shift to renewables and the use of nuclear energy is to be conducted in a new configuration after the elections. At the World Climate Action Summit (COP28) in Dubai in December, a declaration to triple the share of nuclear power (to which Bulgaria has agreed to) was formally announced. According to the document, global nuclear capacity should triple between now and 2050. The summit also decided to phase out fossil fuels by 2050, although the text of the agreement does not clearly state the phasing out of coal, oil and gas. German Foreign Minister

Annalena Baerbock said that for the EU the agreement was only a starting point. Global uncertainty, multiple crises and military conflicts are drastically changing the political landscape, and the conversation on nuclear energy development is back on the agenda. Even in Germany, leading members of Germany's conservative CDU/CSU alliance and the pro-business Free Democrats (FDP) are calling for a reversal of the country's nuclear phase-out.

In 2019, when the last European elections were held, due to numerous extreme weather events, green parties made significant gains in many EU countries in what were called "the first climate elections". The result prompted the then new President of the Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, to present an ambitious climate programme to gain the approval of the European Parliament. With rising prices and the need for security, things are no longer that way. Public opinion polls published by Europe Elects<sup>2</sup> in EU Member States show a rise in support for conservative right-wing parties that are sceptical of progressive climate policy and the 'Green Deal'. This has also triggered opposition from centre-right parties to important legislation such as the Nature Recovery Act. It is the June 2024 elections and the configuration of the groups in Parliament that will prove decisive for the development of European policy in this area.

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<sup>2</sup> Garscha, M. (2023, December 30). EU parliamentary projection: Le Pen's Right-Wing ID rises to third place. Europe Elects. <https://europeelects.eu/2023/12/30/december-2023/>

## Enlargement policy

Currently, the candidate countries to join the EU are Montenegro, Serbia, Turkey, North Macedonia, Albania, Ukraine, Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Georgia. In December last year, the EU launched membership negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, and Georgia was granted candidate country status. Giving Ukraine the green light a few months before the elections could give populists in some EU states an electoral weapon, as the prospect of Ukraine's accession puts the Union under pressure to reform itself by increasing its entire budget through additional taxes or larger contributions from member states and reducing agricultural subsidies per hectare. The way to avoid this would be to postpone the enlargement issue for a few months until after the European Parliament elections and a new College of the European Commission, which would look at the situation with a fresh set of eyes. The notion of reforming the EU in such a way that decisions in some structures are taken by qualified majority rather than unanimity is also being given publicity, but this change also requires unanimous agreement of all member states.

## Migration policy

In December, the Council and the European Parliament agreed on the reform of the EU asylum

and migration system. A key priority for the Union will be to step up efforts to establish an effective, humanitarian and safe European migration policy. The reform foresees stricter procedures, such as a mandatory solidarity mechanism between member states to ease the burden on border states, whereby if a country refuses to accept asylum seekers, it should pay financial compensation or make another contribution. An agreement between the EU and Egypt, similar to the one with Tunisia last year, is also currently being worked on to prevent illegal migration. Under this agreement, in return for financial aid of more than EUR 1 billion, Tunisia has committed itself to preventing migrants from crossing the Mediterranean towards Europe.

EU migration policy will continue to be a major issue in 2024. There has been a significant increase in the political influence of far-right parties, whose rhetoric is strongly anti-migrant. In France, a new and stricter migration law was adopted with the support of the Union Nationale, which Le Pen declared a victory. Similarly, migration policies in Sweden and Finland are also becoming tougher, after the far right in Finland became part of the government and in Sweden tolerated it. In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders won the parliamentary elections last autumn with an anti-migrant message. Indeed, according to a study by the consulting firm Portland Communications provided to POLITICO<sup>3</sup>, there has been a rise of

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<sup>3</sup> Camut, N. (2024, February 12). French far right poised for record surge in EU election, poll shows. POLITICO.

<https://www.politico.eu/article/french-far-right-poised-record-surge-eu-parliament-election-poll-shows-bardella-national-rally/>



populist groups and far-right movements across the continent.

## Security

Donald Trump's statement earlier this month<sup>4</sup>, effectively suggesting that Russia should attack any NATO member that fails to meet its defence spending obligations, is indicative of the urgent need for a strong common European defence strategy. To ensure security in a changing world, the European Union must be able to guarantee the security of its citizens through an autonomous defence policy and greater investment in defence industries. Although Europe does not have the ability to produce the necessary raw materials, such as graphite, which is an important material in the production of helicopters, submarines, artillery and missiles, and 70% of its global production comes from China, long-term planning and coordination of purchases could be implemented. It is important to pursue a vision of strengthening Europe's defence capabilities and industrial base, as well as the security of NATO's borders on European territory, beyond the duration of the war in Ukraine.

## Attitudes of Bulgarian society

The forthcoming rotation of prime ministers will be the uncertain environment in which the election campaign in Bulgaria will take place. A Eurobarometer poll<sup>5</sup> shows an overwhelming unawareness in Bulgarians about when the European Parliament elections will take place. 38% of respondents do not know and 20% gave the wrong answer, 17% of respondents are informed that elections will be held in 2024 but do not know exactly when, and only 25% gave the right answer. The negative trend is not surprising given the low voter turnout in the country in recent years. This makes the task of our MEP candidates even more difficult.

The positioning of the PP-DB coalition will be interesting, as the two formations have different self-identification - "Democratic Bulgaria" to the centre-right and "We Continue the Change" rather to the centre-left, which could lead to a divergence in their positioning on a European level. On the other hand, "Revival" also has to decide which European family it wants to join. In December, the party's leader Kostadin Kostadinov attended a joint meeting of the presidents of the Identity and Democracy member parties. It is possible that for the first time Bulgaria will have a representative in this far-right parliamentary formation.

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<sup>4</sup> FitzGerald, B. J. (2024, February 11). Trump says he would "encourage" Russia to attack Nato allies who do not pay their bills. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-68266447>

<sup>5</sup> European Parliament, Directorate-General for Communication, (2023). European Parliament Eurobarometer: Parlemeter 2023: Six Months Before the 2024 European Elections, Publications Office of the European Union, 140-142. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2861/58496>



## Conclusion

The forthcoming European elections in 2024 are of great importance against the backdrop of evolving geopolitical dynamics and the growing disagreement of European citizens on key policy areas such as agriculture, energy, EU enlargement and migration. The potential for increasing support for populist movements highlights the need for careful analysis of emerging protest movements and their impact on turnout and electoral outcomes. Furthermore, the complex nature of predicting the affiliation of MEPs and the challenges faced by candidates, particularly in countries such as Bulgaria with low turnout, highlight the dynamic and multifaceted nature of European politics. As the elections for the European institutions approach, it remains crucial for political formations to propose solutions to the outstanding problems and to present their vision effectively in order to win the trust and support of European citizens. Traditional parties will have the difficult task of mobilising their electorates with messages that what has been achieved in Europe can easily be lost if it is not continuously defended by the voice of the voters.

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