



EU Elections Series

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Geostrategy

What's at Stake in the EU Elections: Security and Defense

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By Gesine Weber | December 7, 2023

EU Election Series: The European Parliament elections in 2024 will shape the EU's political direction over the next five years and, therefore, constitute a defining moment. In this series, GMF experts discuss the impact the elections will have on EU policy in key areas, consider what can—and should—be done before the elections, and outline potential post-election scenarios.

Few topics have become so relevant for the EU in recent years as defense. When Ursula von der Leyen declared that she wanted to head a [“geopolitical Commission” in 2019](#), some questioned the importance of these aspirations on the grounds that the EU was seen as relying above all on soft power in international affairs. Not only in reaction to Russia's war on Ukraine, but also due to the Commission's significant efforts since 2019, [much has been done to enhance the EU's readiness to play a more prominent role in security and defense](#). The to-do list remains long, however. Wars and crises in the EU's neighborhood, insufficient capabilities, and the structural trend toward US disengagement from Europe give the EU no choice but to step up its ability to act in this arena. There is no doubt that this will remain among the key topics the EU needs to address after the elections.

EU defense may be less affected by the EU elections, at least in the short-term, than other policy fields: for the critical political decisions, the ball is in the member states' courts as the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) remains largely intergovernmental and requires unanimity within the Council. However, EU action in this arena can be significantly impacted by political leadership, and here the elections do matter. The European Parliament approves the Commission president and Commissioners, so the composition of the parliament also determines which candidates can pass. Similarly, the Parliament will have a say on matters that impact security and defense, such as industrial policy or, most importantly, the Union's budget.

Before June 2024: Managing Crises and Adapting Instruments

The central challenge for EU defense in 2024 is that the bloc needs to manage several crises in its neighborhood at the same time: Ukraine, Israel/ Hamas, and Nagorno-Karabakh are at top of the list, but the EU may also need to react to other, unforeseen crises. The key priority is thus to ensure the flexibility and agility of the instruments that allow the EU to react quickly and make best use of existing tools. Top-level policymakers in Brussels should use the last months of the von der Leyen Commission to make another political push for ambitious proposals on security and defense, including those giving more leverage to explicit EU instruments. Since many of the priorities outlined above will require a green light from member states for funding, it will be up to the Commission to assume a coordinating role and come up with creative proposals to secure long-lasting support. Among the processes that are already underway, the EU should thus prioritize the following :

- ***A Long Term Plan for the European Peace Facility:*** The European Peace Facility was originally launched as a tool to support partners in capacity-building, and although this was not explicitly

stated, it had a clear focus on the EU's partners to the south. Russia's war on Ukraine has stepped up its use, as it has served as a mechanism for reimbursing states delivering weapons—including lethal weapons—to Ukraine, and its budget has been gradually topped up. These steps were important and have incentivized member states to enhance military support for Ukraine, but this effort must be maintained over the longer term, not just from one Council decision to the next. Since member states have been wary of greenlighting a [€20-billion top-up for the instrument](#), the Commission must keep pushing and suggest creative models for obtaining their commitment to providing the necessary funding

- ***Rethinking the Operational Leg Through the CSDP Missions and the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity (RDC)***: The war between Israel and Hamas has forced Europeans to the realization that security challenges to its south, most importantly terrorism, did not go away while their attention was focused almost exclusively on Ukraine. The 2024 live exercises of the [RDC](#), a framework to swiftly deploy up to 5,000 troops for crisis management, will provide an important opportunity to practice this swift reaction. But since the force will become operational only in 2025, Europeans must make plans to bridge this gap. These include agreement on scenarios for the use of article 44 of the Treaty on European Union, which allows member states to delegate the tasks of the CSDP to a group of willing and able states.
- ***European Defense-Industrial Strategy***: This [strategy](#) was announced in Commission President von der Leyen's State of the European Union speech in September 2023, and the Commission has just opened the consultation process with stakeholders. The sooner the strategy is adopted, the earlier it can be voted on. This is a necessary step to avoid a gap in EU policy instruments, as the current measures—the [Act in Support of Ammunition Production \(ASAP\)](#) and the [European Defense Industrial Reinforcement Through Procurement Act \(EDIRPA\)](#)—will expire in mid-2025.

Scenarios and Risks: What Happens After the Elections?

From an operational perspective, it will be critical to keep European defense energized after the EU elections. In 2019, it took almost half a year for the von der Leyen Commission to finally take office, resulting in a leadership void and a lack of concrete initiatives. In 2024, the EU cannot afford this. This is why it will be crucial for the Commission and member states to jointly elaborate a solid six-month plan for European defense at the March European Council meeting. Material factors matter to European security and defense, but a solid material underpinning for European defense cannot be taken for granted if Euroskeptical groupings make a strong showing in the new Parliament. The EU strategy for defense-industrial matters is likely to be adopted before the next European Parliament is seated, but since industrial policy is an area where the co-decision procedure applies, it will be up to the new members to adopt concrete industrial policies. Particularly Euroskeptical forces may be less willing to greenlight further EU action in industrial and defense matters, let alone in a combination of the two.

The national results from the European elections will also send a political message to decision-makers in member states' capitals. [While the far-right in the European Parliament will most likely remain fractured](#), strong public support for it would certainly embolden national leaders belonging to either of the two main Euroskeptical parties. They could then pursue a "Europe of Nations" and a return to intergovernmentalism in a more coordinated manner, including by blocking central decisions in the Council.

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About the Author

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