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Geostrategy

What's at Stake in the EU Elections: The Rise of the Hard Right

Vassilis Ntousas and Clara Volintiru

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By Vassilis Ntousas and Clara Volintiru | March 28, 2024

Based on campaign rhetoric so far, European Parliament (EP) elections in June have already fallen victim to one of the most clichéd political hyperboles: It is the most important race in voters' lifetimes. In this case, though, there is little exaggeration. The European institutions and the citizens they serve should brace themselves for the most consequential election in decades.

Before June 2024: The Hard Right Surges

Polling results for Europe's joint hard right (encompassing populist, nationalist, and far right parties) clearly reflect steady, if uneven, gains. Across the continent, political groups once on the fringes are attracting as many as one-third of voters. These parties have deftly exploited rapid social change, increasing cultural polarization, and economic upheaval from a persistent cost-of-living crisis due, in part, to soaring energy prices and stubbornly high inflation. They have also benefitted from a backlash against climate policies, distrust of and discontentment with "the establishment", and above all, insecurity about a renewed surge of migrants and refugees, which briefly slowed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Popularity can mean power. Viktor Orbán has enjoyed a long tenure as Hungary's prime minister, and Giorgia Meloni is well into her second year as his Italian counterpart. The Sweden Democrats have won key policy concessions in return for their critical support of the government in Stockholm, the far right is part of the Finnish ruling coalition, and the Dutch populist Party for Freedom (PVV), which is led by Geert Wilders and secured by far the most parliamentary seats in the last election in the Netherlands, may also soon be part of a new government there. In nearly a dozen European countries, recent EP election [polling](#) reflects these extreme parties' remarkable appeal. Marine Le Pen's National Rally in France, Austria's Freedom Party (FPÖ), the Alternative for Germany (AfD), and the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) are comfortably leading or ranking second.

The composition of the new EP is now expected to reflect Europe's tilt to the right. EU Matrix, a research platform, [projects](#) that centrist parliamentary groups—the center-right European People's Party (EPP), the center-left Socialists and Democrats (S&D), and the liberals of Renew—will retain a majority, albeit their smallest ever, while groups further to the right—Identity & Democracy (ID) and European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR)—will expand significantly.

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Such a rebalanced EP has immense political and policy implications since each group's electoral performance traditionally plays a critical role in the allocation of the EU's most prominent positions. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen is likely to remain in office given that her political family, the EPP, is currently tipped to gain the largest share of the vote. How other key roles will be filled remains uncertain. The S&D, projected to come in second, will undoubtedly want to claim a top job,

possibly that of European Council president, which is currently held by Renew's Charles Michel.

Europe's rightward pull will add uncertainty to the already-complex game of musical chairs and its three-dimensional rules: domestic politics, European political families' vote shares, and the need to distribute offices in a way that ensures balance among families and nationalities. An additional critical factor will be the willingness of the centrist parliamentary groups, if the need arises, to prioritize capability before political affiliation. This means allowing effective leaders, regardless of political family affiliation, to fill the most influential roles and help steer Europe away from extreme alternatives. These roles include EU Council president, EP president, the high representative for foreign affairs and security, and the [proposed](#) new defense commissioner.

A Fraying Cordon Sanitaire?

The rightward pull also risks demolishing a decades-old firewall that has blocked far-right party representatives from power and influence in Brussels. Electoral gains could put them in a position to capture committee chair or rapporteur positions, and complicate the process of selecting the new college of commissioners, which the EP must approve. But the most baleful impact of an ascendant hard right would probably be its capacity to influence Europe's policy agenda and direction. There are valid concerns about threats to democracy and the rule of law, and EU policy on other hot-button issues, such as the war in Ukraine, immigration, cultural identity, religious values, and institutional reform, could see major shifts. Hard-right parliamentarians could also upset the sometimes fragile coalitions that have been cobbled together to support major pieces of EU legislation, such as [vital components](#) of the European Green Deal.

The Way Forward

The growing hard-right camp is, however, not a well-oiled monolith. As in past elections, differences among the parties are sometimes [larger](#) than they appear to be at first glance. They may agree on wanting to limit EU authority and sharply curtail immigration, but they are starkly divided on other issues. The AfD, for example, still calls for Germany's exit from the EU, a markedly different posture from that of many other parties in its cohort—including the Sweden Democrats, the Finns Party, and the National Rally—that have softened their anti-European stance. At the same time, Italy's Meloni has toed a fiercely Atlanticist line and repeatedly backed Ukraine and its territorial integrity, a position in stark contrast with that of the AfD, the FPÖ, the AUR, and Orbán's Fidesz, all of which maintain close ties to the Kremlin. These and other points of misalignment will impede the formation of a stable right-wing EP majority.

Much will also depend on the extent to which mainstream parties are willing to cooperate with the hard right, and on the issues involved in any collaboration. Depending on the degree of hard-right electoral gains, mainstream parties may be tempted to form coalitions of convenience on key policies.

EP campaigns have traditionally been fought almost exclusively on national issues. This time, though, Europeans finally have a real, pan-European political choice to make. For the first time in living memory, their votes will have equally real implications for the entire union.

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About the Author

Vassilis Ntousas is Senior Manager for Europe and Fellow for GMF's Alliance for Securing Democracy. His research interests lie in European foreign policy and the European Union's global engagement. Prior to joining GMF, he was the Senior International Relations Policy Advisor at the Foundation for European Progressive Studies in Brussels, where he led the foundation's global research, advocacy, and strategic convening work. In 2019–2020, he held the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Academy fellowship at Chatham House, where he remains an Academy Associate with the institute's Europe program.

Clara Voluntiru is the GMF Transatlantic Trusts Regional Director, Black Sea.

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