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# New political equations in Europe one year before the European elections

Europe is facing a situation that it never thought it would have to face again: there is now a war on its borders, whereas since 1950 the European project has been built on peace ("Never again"), and as a result the return of power struggles which is forcing Europe to adapt its rules so that it can remain relevant in the global competition. In these circumstances, the European elections of spring 2024 (6-9 June) represent a political opportunity to assert and strengthen Europe's place and weight on the international scene. This election will be the starting point for an almost complete renewal of the European institutions with the appointment of the Commission and the designation of a new President of the European Council. Therefore, a crucial political year lies ahead[1].

What does the political landscape in Europe look like one year before this major electoral event?

## MALIGNED OR UNLOVED POLITICAL PARTIES

Recent elections in Europe have confirmed a trend that has been underway for several years: the disaffection with traditional political parties, with a consequent increase in abstention.

Political life no longer attracts either activists or candidates. The numerous private, professional, regulatory, ethical and financial constraints imposed on candidates and elected officials are deterring the most motivated from engaging in politics. Furthermore, and perhaps as a consequence, voters are less and less inclined to go and vote; some because they find the political offer disappointing or because it does not correspond or no longer corresponds to their expectations, others

because they would like to see the introduction of certain techniques (electronic or postal voting to avoid having to go to the polls) or certain forms of expression (blank vote).

In general, voters are no longer attached to a party and, because of the disappearance of divisive ideologies, their votes fluctuate according to their mood and circumstances. Thus, it appears that voters can choose a candidate regardless of his or her political label, if one is openly displayed.

Throughout Europe, we are witnessing the gradual decline of the governing parties, which have been in power for several decades, whether they lie to the right or left of the political spectrum.

On the left, this is notably the case of the Socialist Party (PS) in France, which went from winning 250 seats in the 1997 parliamentary elections to 138 in 2002 and only 31 in 2022; the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in Germany, which decreased from a score of 38.52% in the 2002 federal elections to 25.7% in 2021; the Democratic Party (PD) in Italy, which went from 33.2% in the 2008 parliamentary elections to 19.07% in 2022, and PASOK in Greece, whose score fell from 43.79% in 2000 to 11.46% in 2023.

In fact, the left now governs in only five countries (Denmark, Portugal, Spain, Germany, Malta).

On the right, the same situation is true for Les Républicains (LR) in France, which collapsed from holding 309 seats in 2002 (UMP at the time) to only 61 in 2022; for the Christian Democratic Union (CDU/CSU), from 38.51% in 2002 to 18.9% in 2022; for the People's Party (PP) in Spain, from

44.52% in 2000 to 20.31% in 2019; for the Social Democratic Party (PSD) in Portugal, from 40.21% in 2002 to 28.41% in 2022; and above all for Forza Italia in Italy, from 29.48% in 2001 to 8.13% in 2022

The moderate right has, to date, nine heads of government (Cyprus, Romania, Greece, Croatia, Sweden, Ireland, Lithuania, Latvia, Austria). Finland could join them following the general elections on 2 April won by the national coalition party (Kokoomus), bringing the total to 10.

In fact, twelve Member States, almost half, are no longer governed by the left or the right. Four are led by Liberals (Estonia, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands), three are led by Conservatives (Italy, Poland, Czech Republic), two are independent (France, Slovenia) even though their MEPs sit in the Renew group, and one is in conflict with all the current European parties (Hungary) and its MEPs sit among the non-attached members.

Finally, two countries (Bulgaria, Slovakia) are in the process of appointing a new government.

### OFTEN INCONCLUSIVE EXPERIMENTS

The corollary is the rise of more radical parties, often described as populist, which tend to be on the right of the political spectrum, even if these experiments often prove inconclusive.

Voters, when they go to the polls, are increasingly inclined to express their dismay at the profound changes taking place. Having lost their understanding of the purpose of political parties, which are accused of doing more or less the same thing in the face of external constraints imposed on each country by, among other things, the interdependence of global economies and the dependence of decision-makers, they either desert the polling booth or convince themselves that certain parties would act differently because they have not yet held office.

In France, the far-right Rassemblement National (RN) and the far-left La France Insoumise (LFI) are scoring higher and higher with each election. In Germany, the

far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) is making inroads, particularly in the eastern Länder. The far-right party, Vox, came third in the parliamentary elections in Spain in November 2019, and might join forces with the People's Party (PP). The Chega party in Portugal came third in the general elections in January 2022. A number of northern European countries are in a similar situation: the Party for Freedom (PVV) in the Netherlands came third in the general elections of March 2021, and the Forum for Democracy (FvD) quadrupled its number of seats; the True Finns (PS) came second in the general elections of April 2023 and might again enter government. The Swedish Democrats (SD) trailed the Social Democratic Party (SAP) in the legislative elections in September 2022, but did succeed in taking the lead over the moderate right party (Moderaterna). They did not enter the government led by Moderate leader, Ulf Kristersson, but are wielding strong influence over government policy.

These good results do not always translate into victories. Certainly, Italy witnessed the accession to government in 2018 of the Five Star Movement (M5S) and the Northern League (Lega) and, in October 2022, of Fratelli d'Italia (FDI) with The League, which is no longer as powerful as in 2018, together with Forza Italia (FI). This party, that lies centre-right, had already governed with a populist party, the National Alliance (AN) in 1994, but back then it was the main party in the coalition, whereas it is now only the third and smallest party in the new coalition. The far-right Party for Freedom (FPÖ) participated in the Austrian government in 2017, but left in 2019 following a high-profile scandal that led to fresh elections. The same party first took part in government in 2000, which led to strong dissent within the party, which also resulted in snap elections and, above all, was condemned by other EU Member States.

On the other side of the political spectrum, the radical left-wing party (SYRIZA) won the general elections in Greece in 2015 with 36.3% due to the crisis affecting the country at the time. But because of the tough measures it had to take despite its promises, it was not re-elected in 2019 and during the general elections on 21 May 2023 it took second place, trailing the party of outgoing Prime Minister, New Democracy (40.79%) by more than twenty points (20.07%).

Looking objectively at these recent examples, we can conclude that the government practices of these parties, whether populist or extremist, were not successful. This has resulted in their early departure from government before the end of their mandate: in Italy, where Mario Draghi was called in as a saviour to head a government of national unity in 2021, two years before the end of the mandate of the M5S-Lega government; in Austria, in May 2019, the FPÖ was forced to leave the government coalition it had entered in December 2017; in Finland, the True Finns joined the government in 2015 but split in two in 2017, dividing those who wanted to leave the government and those who intended to participate. They might return following the legislative elections on 2 April 2023 when they garnered 20.05%, just behind Kokoomus (20.82%).

#### **AN INCREASINGLY FRAGMENTED POLITICAL SCENE**

With traditional parties having less clout, a larger number of parties is needed to form a strong majority government coalition.

Previously, one party could attract a majority of voters on its own or needed a smaller party to form a majority. Until the last federal elections in September 2021, Germany was governed by a two-party coalition: the CDU mostly allied with the FDP (1961-1965, 1982-1998, 2009-2013); the SPD with the FDP (1969-1982) or with the Greens (1998-2005) or the two major parties (CDU, SPD) formed a 'grand coalition' (1966-1969, 2005-2009 and 2013-2021).

It now seems that the coalition of at least three parties is necessary to form a government. This is the political situation in nine Member States: Ireland, Sweden, Luxembourg, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Germany, Italy. But it can be four parties (Slovakia, Netherlands), or even five (Finland) or more like Belgium with seven parties. Governments with such coalitions now form a majority in the European Union.

This is leading to the formation of heterogeneous coalitions. In Germany, for example, after the September 2021 elections, the country was to be governed by a

so-called Ampel coalition, bringing together, for the first time in its history, three parties: Social Democrat (SPD), Green and Liberal (FDP). Eighteen months after taking office in December 2021, we can only note the difficulties of this tripartite coalition in taking decisions, especially following the war in Ukraine, a subject that was obviously not included in the coalition contract, a document that is always the focus of long discussions and written entirely in Germany.

In Denmark, after the November 2022 elections, outgoing Prime Minister, Mette Frederiksen of the Social Democratic Party (SD), formed a new three-party government with the Liberals (V) and the Moderates (M), created in June 2022 by former Prime Minister Lars-Lykke Rasmussen, after a split from the Liberal Party.

In Italy, Forza Italia, which has governed in the past as the main political force in the government, accepted to be the smallest partner - due to its results - in a coalition led by Giorgia Meloni whose party Fratelli d'Italia, the only party that did not participate in Mario Draghi's national unity government, won the September 2022 elections. This atypical combination brings together three parties from the right, ranging from the centre to the extreme, whose European representatives sit in three different groups: the European People's Party (EPP) for Forza Italia, Identity and Democracy (ID) for La Lega and Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) for Fratelli d'Italia. It is worth noting that the leading party in the government comes from the smallest of these three groups in the European Parliament. Does this foreshadow changes in Strasbourg next year?

These "plural" coalitions involve long negotiations in terms of reaching coalition agreement. It was the case in the Netherlands, where Prime Minister Mark Rutte (Party for Democracy and Freedom, VVD), who has been in office since October 2010, took ten months to form his fourth government in January 2022 following the March 2021 elections.

In some countries, the results are so close between two coalition parties that they are considering a mid-term rotation of responsibilities. In Ireland, for example, following the February 2020 elections won by the far-

left Sinn Fein, the centre-right Fianna Fail (FF) and Fine Gael (FG) agreed a coalition deal with the Greens that included a ground-breaking swap of the Prime Minister's post. Micheál Martin (FF), who was appointed Taoiseach in 2020, handed over his post to Leo Varadkar (FG) in December 2022.

In Bulgaria, the formation of a coalition bringing together the Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) and We Continue the Change - Democratic Bulgaria (PP-DB) was only possible after five legislative elections in two years and thanks to the appointment of two new faces, including Mariya Gabriel (GERB) who has had to resign from the European Commission. Bulgaria has adopted the rotation model for the post of Prime Minister, as experimented in Ireland. Nikolay Denkov (PP-DB) will head the government for 9 months, and Mariya Gabriel will succeed him for the following 9 months. This agreement was formalised on 6 June 2023.

Ultimately, European democracy should not show signs of weakness, while its model is openly challenged by authoritarian and dictatorial regimes (Russia, Türkiye, China).

### THREE SPECIFIC SITUATIONS

In the European political landscape, three countries stand out from the usual classifications and break out of the traditional patterns.

#### HUNGARIAN ILLIBERALISM

In the last general elections in April 2022, the Young Democrats-Hungarian Civic Union (Fidesz) party won for the fourth consecutive time. The coalition formed with the Christian Democratic Party (KDNP) achieved an absolute majority (54.13%) against a coalition of six opposition parties (34.44%). Having already been at the head of government between 1998 and 2002, Viktor Orbán is one of the heads of government in the European Union in office for more than ten years ... along with Dutchman Mark Rutte.

This longevity annoys his detractors given the Hungarian Prime Minister's personality and his outspoken statements. Long affiliated to the European People's Party (EPP), he was forced to leave it in February 2021 rather than be expelled. Since then, its twelve MEPs (out of twenty-one elected in Hungary) sit among the non-attached members, the only one elected to remain in the EPP being the KDNP representative.

This situation is all the stranger insofar as these twelve MEPs now sit with the non-attached members of the extremist Jobbik Party. The score of this far-right party has long been put forward as an explanation for those of Fidesz, since it came second in the 2018 elections and nobody wanted to associate with it, including in the European Parliament. In 2022, it ran in the six-party coalition. Another far-right party, Our Homeland, came third in that election (5.88%).

We should never forget the subtleties of the Hungarian political landscape and that the left, in power from 2002 to 2010, was responsible for a certain amount of malpractice and fraud, which it has acknowledged, but for which the electorate still does not seem prepared to forgive it.

As a result of Viktor Orbán's particular positioning, Hungary finds itself in the direct firing line of the European institutions, since the latter are applying the new conditionality rules because of its failure to respect the rule of law. The country will therefore only be able to obtain the European funds from the Recovery Plan to which it is entitled when it falls in line and changes its legislation. Its political marginalisation compounds further the conflict ongoing between it and its partners.

#### POLISH NEO-CONSERVATISM

Another EU Member State in the spotlight is Poland. The largest country of the 2004 enlargement, the country of *Solidarność*, has been governed since 2015 by the conservative, nationalist and really not European, Law and Justice (PiS) party. As a result, it has passed controversial laws undermining the independence of the media and the judiciary, for which the country is regularly lambasted in the European Parliament, and it

[1] Before the FREMM programme, the Horizon air defence frigate programme enabled this proximity in the naval industry between France and Italy to be established for major units

becoming the focus of several infringement proceedings by the European Commission, as well as damning judgments on the part of the European Court of Justice.

The government has therefore been forced to reverse the decried reform of its judicial system, otherwise the country would not be able to receive European funds from the Recovery Plan, which have been blocked to date for it failing to respect the rule of law. However, the Polish population, as in Hungary, declares itself to be predominantly European in opinion polls (Eurobarometer) and the non-payment of funds – of which the country is one of the main beneficiaries – would hardly have been appreciated.

It was necessary to reach this point for this government, whose main inspiration is Jaroslaw Kaczynski, even though he was only a member for 18 months (October 2020 to June 2022), to reverse its position and abandon its judicial reform. The Russian aggression in neighbouring Ukraine was also a determining factor in this reversal, since Poland is also one of Moscow's most virulent critics.

Although it also holds the presidency of the Republic, the PiS no longer has a majority in the Senate, where the opposition holds most seats (52 out of 100). Is this a sign of the upcoming elections this autumn?

It should be remembered that the PiS already held office from 2005 to 2007. But this first experience ended prematurely after dissension within the heterogeneous coalition formed at the time with populists (SRPP) and nationalists (LPR), which led to early elections which it lost.

### THE FRENCH EXCEPTION

After fifty-nine years of power sharing at the head of the State between the right (1958-1981, 1995-2012) and the left (1981-1995 and 2012-2017), France faced a new political era in May 2017.

The French elected a 39-year-old President of the Republic, the youngest elected to this office under the Fifth Republic, after Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, elected

aged 48 in 1974. Emmanuel Macron claims to be "neither on the Right nor the Left", or rather "simultaneously on the Right and the Left".

Contrary to an - unwritten - rule that prevailed until then, according to which every presidential candidate was supported by one or more political parties, Emmanuel Macron stood outside this classic partisan scheme, heading a movement he called, *En Marche*, formed in 2016.

He was re-elected in April 2022, a first since 1958 outside the so-called cohabitation period, i.e., when the president and the government are not from the same political camp (1986-1988, 1993-1995, 1997-2002).

In June 2017, the French people massively elected the candidates who ran under the label of the presidential majority in the legislative elections that followed, giving an absolute majority of 308 seats (out of 577) to the President and leading to a profound renewal of the National Assembly. As an indication, the right had only 112 seats and the left 30.

Against all expectations, due to the two-round majority voting system, this situation was not repeated in June 2022. For the first time on this scale in the Fifth Republic, the French gave only a relative majority to the re-elected president (245 seats), resulting in a situation that is unusual in France, but well known elsewhere in Europe: the need for a coalition. This was not possible given the new configuration of the lower house where the extremes (left and right) elected many candidates (respectively 75 and 89) ahead of the moderate parties of the right (61) and left (31). Now the government is constantly in quest of votes to obtain a majority for each legislative text.

Is this lack of a majority in a majoritarian voting system the new norm? Nothing is less certain. With their first-past-the-post system, the British have experienced coalitions: in 2010, the Conservatives led by David Cameron had to ally with the Lib-Dems to win a majority, but they won the next elections alone in 2015. In 2017, the Conservatives led by Theresa May had to negotiate with the Northern Irish Unionist Party (DUP,) which had ten elected members, to gain a majority. They won an

absolute majority again in the December 2019 elections. But they have changed Prime Minister three times since then.

### WOMEN IN POWER

Since January 2022, the European Parliament is once again - and for only the third time - presided over by a woman, Roberta Metsola (Malta), after the Frenchwomen Simone Veil (1979-1982) and Nicole Fontaine (1999-2002). She joins Germany's Ursula von der Leyen, the first woman to be appointed president of the European Commission in 2019, and France's Christine Lagarde, who was appointed head of the European Central Bank (ECB) in November 2019 for a term of eight years.

The European institutions, apart from the Council and the Court of Justice, are thus presided over by women. One could add the European Ombudsman, Emily O'Reilly, and the Chief Prosecutor of the European Public Prosecutor's Office, Laura Codruta Kövesi.

In the Member States, five women are currently heads of government (Estonia, Lithuania, Denmark, Italy and France), four are Presidents of the Republic (Greece, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia).

This situation means that Europe is a model and an example in terms of equality between men and women, or the promotion of women to the highest positions. Nowhere else is the feminisation of politics or economics so high. Europe has a specific position on the international scene, apart from not being a state: it embodies female power, which distinguishes it from some of its immediate neighbours (Russia, Türkiye) or international competitors (China) whose leaders are male, who aim to be dominant, and not who do not really lean towards democratic practices.

And what if this scenario was ultimately a strength?

### LESSONS FOR THE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS

#### What level of turnout?

During the last European elections in May 2019, turnout improved, rising to above 50% for the first time since 1999: 50.66%, up 8.06 points on 2014. According to the [Spring 2023 Eurobarometer](#) survey published on 6 June, 56% of Europeans say they are interested in the next European elections. This figure is six points higher than in 2018, which bodes well for the future... even if, with a year to go to the polls, it is still too early to know how this enthusiasm will really develop and in favour of which parties.

#### A swing to the right?

After Sweden and Finland, where right-wing parties won the elections by defeating the left-wing parties in office, and after Italy, which witnessed the triumph of a so-called 'centre-right' coalition, whose model is unlikely to be transposed elsewhere, who will be next?

The Greeks are expected to confirm on June 25 their May 21 vote in favour of New Democracy, and the Spanish will go to the polls (snap elections) on July 23 following the rout of the left ruling party PSOE in the regional and municipal elections on May 28. Will the parliamentary elections confirm the good results achieved by the right-wing PP and far-right Vox?

Some of the less well-represented parties are hoping to shake up the political landscape by calling for new party restructuring so as to break out of the isolation in which they have become trapped.

Although in Italy, Giorgia Meloni has succeeded in rallying Fratelli d'Italia (ECR), the Lega (ID) and Forza Italia (EPP) around her party, and in Spain the PP and Vox have come together in a predictable way for them to be in a position to win a majority in several regions, the situation is very different in Poland, where both houses of Parliament are up for renewal this autumn. A *rapprochement* between the EPP and the ECR, which some are already imagining, is bound to clash against the reality of Polish political landscape. The former



President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, gave up the reins of the EPP party in June 2022 to return to Poland to fight the ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS), which sits with Fratelli d'Italia in the ECR.

The huge popular demonstration on 4 June, which brought together more than 500,000 Poles, opponents of the ruling party, illustrates the clash between the two models of society defended by the Civic Platform (PO) and the PiS and the irreconcilable gulf between them.

### A new coalition?

The 2019 European elections were also unique as they ended the *de facto* duopoly between the European People's Party (EPP) and the Social Democrats (S&D) that had existed since the first direct elections to the European Parliament in 1979. The two largest parties did not win an absolute majority. As in some Member States, an alliance between three groups was necessary to achieve a majority. In 2019, the third group (Renew, Liberals) passed the 100 MEPs mark (101). [Initial forecasts](#) seem to indicate that the two main groups (EPP and S&D) should remain the same even if they each lose elected members, but the competition is open to see who will be the third group between Renew, which is estimated, so far, to win 90 elected members, and ECR, which is currently credited with 82 elected members. An absolute majority in Parliament should therefore only be achieved with the support of 3 groups, notably for the appointment of the Commission. Will there be a repeat of the 2024? Or could a reshuffle be underway?

In the run-up to the vote, the European parties are now preparing their positions and the first areas of tension are beginning to emerge. Regarding the Green Deal, which under Frans Timmermans (S&D), is the Commission's priority, the EPP seems more interested in protecting the growth of the European economy, aiming to make a difference on certain aspects of the project and to distance itself from the S&D, as well as the Greens, and even from Renew. There is also a growing rift over migration, which divides many countries, while the European Pact on Immigration and Asylum is still mired in institutional procedures.

As a result, there is a good chance that the traditional political balance will be disrupted in June 2024. However, the openly Eurosceptic parties are finding it difficult to develop a clear line and, above all, to unite. Moreover, their traditional positions, which are often more ideological than real, do not seem to meet the Europeans' expectations, as reflected in the opinion polls. In the view of the new challenges that Europe faces in the 21st century, and given the war being waged on its immediate borders against its values and its model of society, it is clearly not a weak Europe that people want, but one that is stronger.

With a year to go to the European elections, many uncertainties remain, but it is already possible to forecast that a few surprises are in store.

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