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Where is Europe Heading? EU Parliament Elections Set the Course

By Thomas Brey

According to all commentators in the media, academia and politics, the elections for the European Parliament (6-9 June 2024) had to answer two key questions. What status does the transnational European Union enjoy against the backdrop of increasingly strong populist right-wing national conservatism in almost all member states? Voter turnout should shed light on this. It should show what significance citizens still ascribe to the Union. The second big question was whether the strengthening of right-wing parties in some European countries would also lead to a shift in the balance of power in the EU Parliament.

The election results

An earthquake, but not a dam break - this is how the elections results could be characterized. Although the two previous right-wing populist party alliances, the ECR (the European Conservatives and Reformists) and ID (Identity and Democracy) won significantly more votes, the pro-European camp remained the strongest force. The two far-right factions have 131 MPs in the new parliament, which means they are a long way from a parliamentary majority (361 out of 720 seats). The clear winner is the EPP (European

People's Party) with 185 seats - a small increase of nine seats compared to the last EU elections. They are followed by the Social Democrats with 137 MEPs (similar to 2019) and the Liberals with 79 representatives, who previously had 102 MEPs. The clear election loser is the Greens with 52 seats (minus 19). All of these pro-European parties still have a comfortable majority and could therefore enable the current European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to serve a second term in office.

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The extremely low voter turnout in most EU countries, as in the last EU elections, shows that Brussels is very far away for the population and they obviously meet each other with little interest. Extremely low turnouts were recorded in Croatia (21 per cent), Lithuania (29), Bulgaria (32), Latvia (34), the Czech Republic (36) and Portugal (38). Apart from the record of almost 65 per cent in Germany, participation in the large EU states also remained moderate: 48 per cent of eligible voters cast their vote in Italy, around 50 per cent in Spain and almost 52 per cent in France. Why is there so little interest in the EU, which has intervened deeply in the national economies and policies of all member

states? What has the previous Commission achieved for the citizens?

Successes and failures of the EU Commission

1. Corona pandemic

One of the greatest successes of the outgoing EU Commission is considered to be the management of the COVID-19 pandemic (since the beginning of 2020). At the end of 2020, the Commission started the joint procurement and distribution of medicines for all EU member states. By autumn 2023, 4.2 billion vaccine doses had been made available. In August last year, 85 per cent of all EU citizens had been vaccinated against the virus at least once. Brussels also supplied 530 million vaccine doses to countries outside the EU. This positive balance is overshadowed by the allegations of corruption against Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, who is said to have negotiated a billion-euro deal for coronavirus vaccine orders by text message. As the German had refused to publish the corresponding text messages and thus dispel the allegations, the New York Times has filed a lawsuit against the EU Commission for the release of these documents. A decision in this court case is still pending. After overcoming the coronavirus crisis, the EU member states agreed

for the first time in history to take on joint debt to deal with the negative consequences of the health emergency. A recovery fund called 'Next Generation EU' totaling over 800 billion euros is to be used between 2020 and 2026, primarily for the benefit of EU countries that have suffered particularly severe economic disadvantages as a result of the pandemic, such as Spain, Italy and Portugal. A particular focus of this program is on the 'green transition', digitalization, modernization of healthcare systems and the promotion of research and innovation.

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However, initial statistical data shows that these targets were only partially achieved. While the EU Commission had originally expected a growth boost of 1.9 per cent, this stimulus actually only amounted to 0.4 per cent. In the large EU countries like Germany, France, Italy and Spain, a positive growth effect of between zero and 0.3 per cent is only expected by 2026. In many countries, there is a lack of concrete projects that could receive EU funding from the Next Generation program. In the meantime, the EU Commission has proposed taking on new Community debt for other areas such as defense and security policy. Germany in particular, as the

largest net contributor, is vehemently opposed to this. The Netherlands is also strictly opposed. In general, the dividing line between the pros and cons of joint debt runs between Southern and Northern Europe.

2. Migration

The EU's record on migration policy is ambivalent. The EU spent three years arguing about the Pact on Migration and Asylum, which was finally agreed between the Council and Parliament in December 2023 and only finally adopted this May. The aim is to introduce stricter screening of applicants, health and security checks and faster examination procedures. The core of the new policy is 'mandatory solidarity': member states can either accept a fixed number of refugees or must transfer 20,000 euros to Brussels for each asylum seeker assigned to their country but rejected. The aim of these regulations is to achieve around 30,000 resettlements per year. Implementing the reform is likely to be difficult - especially as the EU Parliament has moved strongly to the right as a result of the recent elections. Hungary and Poland in particular have been campaigning against the new directives for a long time.

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“The migration pact is another nail in the coffin of the EU. Unity is dead, secure borders no longer exist. Hungary will never bow to the mass migration mania“, said Prime Minister Viktor Orbán after the vote on the new policy in the EU Parliament. Donald Tusk, who wants to restore relations between Warsaw and Brussels after eight years of tensions under the right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party, also stuck to Poland’s previous official line and described the EU asylum pact as „unacceptable“ for his country: “We will protect Poland against the relocation mechanism”, announced Tusk, who, as President of the EU Council (2014 - 2019), should be very familiar with the values of the Union. After all, the estimated funding of two billion euros by 2027 could prove to be far too low to guarantee the new infrastructure and the recruitment of new employees.

3. Ukraine and Gaza

The EU’s policy following Russia’s attack on Ukraine is largely viewed favorably. Despite all differences of opinion, a clear condemnation of Russia was achieved. In coordination with the US, arms deliveries and sanctions packages were initiated and millions of Ukrainian refugees were taken in. The decoupling from Russian gas and oil was also achieved (exceptions for Slovakia, Austria and Hungary).

Despite all the sanctions, however, Russia could not be clearly weakened because there are too many loopholes to circumvent these sanctions. Ukraine’s military and economic aid also remained insufficient to provide the country with military advantages. Hungary’s Orbán blocked a financial package of 50 billion euros for the country’s financial survival for months. Hungary only relented in February 2024 after the EU Commission released billions of euros that had actually been frozen due to massive violations of Hungary’s fundamental rights.

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As usual, the EU (which provided more aid than the US) showed a clear difference between the military aid promised and the aid delivered (144 billion to 77 billion euros). While the EU was still largely united against Russia’s war of aggression, massive differences emerged between the EU member states over the war in Gaza. At the end of May, Spain and Ireland managed to agree to recognize a Palestinian state. Slovenia also did it at the beginning of June, and France is not averse. Ten of the 27 EU member states had already recognized a Palestinian state years ago.

4. Climate

The EU Commission's climate policy was entitled the 'Green Deal'. The aim of this program is to make Europe the world's first climate-neutral continent by 2050 and to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% of 1990 levels by 2030. A key instrument for these ambitious targets was the ban on cars with combustion engines from 2035, which was adopted in March 2023. This decision is to be reviewed again as early as 2026 to determine the impact of the increase in e-cars on greenhouse gas emissions.

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To this end, the production and recycling of e-cars are now to be included in the CO2 balance, so that the overall balance between e-cars and combustion engines shifts to the disadvantage of electric cars. Numerous major parties in Europe have now spoken out in favor of lifting the ban on cars with petrol engines. The massive and sometimes violent farmer protests in many EU countries against stricter cultivation rules and the cancellation of subsidies at the turn of the year 2023/2024 have forced the EU Commission to soften or completely reverse many of its regulations.

5. EU enlargement

In December 2023, the EU leadership decided to start accession negotiations with Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova. However, it is unlikely that they will be able to start as planned this summer. Hungary recently spoke out against this because it first wants to achieve improvements for its minority of around 100,000 people in Ukraine. In contrast, the Western Balkan countries have not made any significant progress in their negotiations with Brussels in recent years.

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On the contrary, North Macedonia, which has been an official candidate for EU membership since 2005, has been blocked year after year with ever new demands from its neighbors. First by Greece, which insisted on changing the name of the state of Macedonia to North Macedonia. Then by Bulgaria, whose sometimes absurd demands would ultimately lead to the abandonment of North Macedonia's national history and even language. In response to these repeated blockades, the electorate voted in favor of the right-wing nationalist opposition in May of this year. The new rulers want to revoke

the agreement with Greece in the decades-long name dispute. New conflict and a further EU blockade for this small country are therefore inevitable.

Tasks for the future: Internal reforms

The accession of new members would have a major impact on the EU budget, particularly with regard to the distribution of the EU budget. While the Union's income would remain the same, some countries would have to accept losses in their funding from Brussels, which is hardly conceivable. Overall, the accession of Ukraine, Moldova and the Western Balkan countries would lead to additional annual EU expenditure totaling 19 billion euros. However, an ambitious enlargement policy poses institutional challenges for the EU. The current EU treaties theoretically allow for a community of up to 35 members. However, the complicated and ineffective decision-making processes that are already criticized today would become even more difficult. For this reason, many current members are endeavoring to reform the EU structures before accepting new states into their circle. Most recently, French President Emmanuel Macron warned in his keynote speech to 10,000 young Europeans in Dresden in May that the EU as we know it today could even die if reforms are not made. This would

require increased cooperation between the members under the leadership of France and Germany. He cited the assumption of new common debts as an example, which Germany in particular strictly rejects.

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Back in 2017, the EU Commission compiled various scenarios for the future of this association of states in a "White Paper". One could remain with the status quo, but this would not solve any of the current problems. In a second model, the members would only agree on a common internal market, i.e. an economic union. The third scenario describes the creation of a "core Europe" or a "two-speed Europe": Those members who are willing to do so would become more and more integrated, while the others would only be included in decisions, funding and agreed policies on a case-by-case basis. This would create a „two-class society“, criticize the countries that reject this position. Finally, there is the scenario of ever deeper integration of all EU countries, which would include a separate European army, a common tax system and common debts. Foreign policy would also be controlled from Brussels, over which the individual members would no longer

have any influence. The ultimate goal would be a kind of “United States of Europe.” There is therefore no foreseeable consensus among its current members on what the EU will look like in a few years’ time. And there is certainly no consensus on how to achieve more efficient decision-making processes. The proposal by large countries that not every EU state, no matter how small, such as Malta, Luxembourg or Cyprus should have its own commissioner, is naturally met with rejection in these countries in particular.

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The abolition of the principle of unanimity for important decisions also does not meet with the approval of some countries. This is because it would remove their veto rights, which have previously been used to push through individual national interests along the lines of ‘I’ll only vote in favor if I get this or that from the EU Commission in return’. Hungary recently used this tactic to ‘unlock’ billions in frozen EU funds. There are already many areas in which the EU countries are pulling in different directions. The differences in climate, migration and debt policy have already been outlined. France and other EU countries are focusing

on nuclear power in their energy policy, while Germany has withdrawn from this technology, but must co-finance the expansion of nuclear energy within the EU as a ‘green technology’. Displeasure is inevitable in the medium term. France wants to impose high tariffs on China because its products are so cheap in Europe due to excessive state subsidies that European products are being squeezed out. Germany must bear in mind that high tariffs on Chinese goods would jeopardize the major German car manufacturers, for whom China is the most important sales market.

Outlook for the future

What are the most important tasks, areas for reform, but also explosive areas for the future EU? The Union must find an answer to the rise of populism and right-wing extremism. Against this backdrop, there are big question marks over projects such as European defense, internal reforms, climate policy, migration and the implementation of European values such as human rights, freedom and freedom of movement, democracy with its separation of powers, equality, the rule of law, freedom of expression and freedom of the media. Above all, the EU could face a crucial test in its foreign policy. Following Hungary’s example, Slovakia is also reorganizing its state and society in line

with Orbán's propagated 'illiberal democracy' with authoritarian goals after the recent change of power to right-wing populists. Both countries are demanding the lifting of sanctions against Russia and individual oligarchs as well as the cessation of all (arms) aid to Ukraine. In the EU countries like Bulgaria and Romania, we can see how Russian narratives are becoming socially acceptable and the domestic political climate is clearly shifting in favor of the Kremlin - also with the help of Russophile parties. We are seeing the same development in Austria, where elections to the National Council are due in autumn 2024. In all polls, the right-wing populist and pro-Russia FPÖ (the Freedom Party of Austria) is clearly in the lead with around 30 per cent. Its chairman Herbert Kickl is already referring to himself as the future "People's Chancellor" ("Volkskanzler"), echoing Adolf Hitler's choice of words.

The European population is still clearly in favor of the EU. In the latest representative Eurobarometer survey, 61 per cent were optimistic about the future of the Union (72 per cent in Croatia). However, approval is not equally strong everywhere. In France, only 47 per cent of citizens see a positive future for the EU. In view of the many unresolved problems, it is at least questionable whether the EU will still be seen in such a favorable light by the

Parliament and Commission after the five-year legislative period that is now beginning. Although right-wing parties remain in the minority in the EU Parliament, they are continuing their rapid rise in some large member states. In France, right-wing extremists won almost 40 per cent of the vote in the EU elections. President Emmanuel Macron, whose party only came second and received around half as many votes as the right-wing nationalist party Rassemblement National led by Marine Le Pen, reacted on the evening of the election by calling early parliamentary elections on 30 June and 7 July, i.e. before the Olympic Games.

Commentators spoke of a very risky gamble by Macron, whose calculation that citizens would decide differently in national elections than in the EU elections could also backfire. In Germany, the anti-EU Alternative for Germany (AfD) became the second strongest party for the first time and even outperformed Chancellor Olaf Scholz's Social Democrats. It cannot be ruled out that the AfD will be able to continue this triumphant advance in the eagerly awaited regional elections in the autumn, where they are even in first place in the polls. Not to mention the national elections next year. In conclusion: It is easily possible that right-wing populist and EU-critical parties could come to power in key EU member states within a very

short space of time. This would fundamentally call into question the character of the EU. After all, despite all the powers of the EU Parliament, the most important decisions are still taken by the governments of the nation states.

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