VISEGRAD / INSIGHT

EP ELECTIONS 2024: HOW DEMOCRACY CAN WIN AND EUROPE LOSE

Strategic Foresight from Central and Eastern Europe

Visegrad Insight is the main platform of debate and analysis on Central Europe

_____

This edition's partners

Bratislava Policy Institute (Slovakia)
d|part (Germany)
Euro Créative (France)
Fondazione Giuseppe di Vagno (Italy)
Latvian Transatlantic Organisation (Latvia)
Open Lithuania Foundation (Lithuania)
Robert Schuman Institute (Hungary)
THE CIVICS Innovation Hub (Bulgaria)
University Babeș-Bolyai (Romania)

_____

Co-funded by
the European Union

respublica   VISEGRAD / INSIGHT

Will the Vote Be a Catalyst for Change?

MAGDA JAKUBOWSKA

Vice President
Res Publica Foundation

WOJCIECH PRZYBYLSKI

Editor-in-Chief
Visegrad Insight

FOUR SCENARIOS FOR EUROPE

The European Union stands at a decisive point with the upcoming EU Parliament elections and the formation of a new Commission. These events will significantly shape the state of democracy within the EU and its role as a global actor. The EU's democratic resilience and ability to act hinge on collective efforts, political will and adaptability.

As the EU Parliament elections unfold, the global repercussions of decisions made in each Member State become increasingly evident, underscoring the urgent need for the EU to fortify democracy and assert tactical independence to maintain its relevance.

In this report that lays out strategic foresight based on a year-long discussion with civil society leaders across the EU, we explore potential outcomes and their implications on the democratic policies agenda juxtaposed with the global context of war. This report delves into the impact of the EU Parliament Elections, the formation of the new commission on democracy and the global position of the European Union. It systematically examines internal and external challenges, mapping EU responses to safeguard democratic resilience and electoral processes. Additionally, it provides specific policy recommendations to enhance democracy within the Union.

The next five years will be the make-or-break moment for the European promise to ensure peace, stability and prosperity. Depending on the ability to support Ukraine's sovereignty and the nature of transatlantic relations, the European Union will have to adapt to a quickly changing global environment to protect its democratic foundations. The EU's solidarity with Ukraine will reverberate with the democratic processes across Europe.

Similarly, the shape of American politics will affect European electoral trajectories. Such critical junctures are particularly pronounced in Central Europe – primarily in the four Visegrad democracies – where the tensions over the rule of law and security have already altered the Union's political dynamics. Threat perceptions and trends amplified in the region are more likely to impact the future of the block overall, and the regional perspective – while rarely coherent – must nevertheless be considered in planning the future EU Strategic Agenda 2024-2029.

Since its onset, the European project has been primarily a peacebuilding effort. In line with this original objective, the EU agenda has developed further to include prosperity, democracy and foreign policy. But this does not mean that peace and democracy are certainties, as reminded by the ongoing war in Ukraine, tragic events in Israel or the continuing efforts to restore the rule of law on the continent.

Given the ongoing global pressures, from climate change to new geopolitical conflicts, the 2023 Granada declaration of the European Council reiterated the EU's promise of peace and prosperity. However, too little emphasis has been placed on the internal processes that ensure democratic foundations and economic and security resilience.

This report pinpoints four scenarios that develop along with potential transatlantic disunity and the future of the EU's perspective on the war in Ukraine. The fallout of each scenario on the EU's democratic security agenda is significant. It poses several challenges to democratic health and participation in member states, fundamental rights, the rule of law, and the EU's external power as a global actor.

The challenges and strategies for addressing the associated gaps have emerged from an extensive strategic foresight project involving 10 partner organisations from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and beyond. This collaborative effort engaged over 200 participants, including diverse groups of researchers, policy experts, active politicians from all sides, youth, opinion leaders and more. As a result, we present this report as an inspiration for fostering public discourse both before and after the European Union elections.

Key Recommendations

The implementation of these recommendations requires a strategic and phased approach. Initially, a comprehensive assessment of current policies and their impact on societal divisions must be conducted. This will inform the development of a detailed action plan that prioritises the harmonisation of cultural and economic disparities.

1. It is imperative to uphold and make the rule of law accountable, employing both incentives and sanctions judiciously without tipping into overregulation. Meaningful consequences for member states that stray from these principles must be imposed, and a reduction in the reluctance to enforce procedures that bolster the effectiveness of the rule of law is crucial.
2. The European Union's trajectory necessitates a unified approach to reconcile societal disparities and address the widening cultural and economic divides. A thorough evaluation of existing policies' effects on societal fragmentation is imperative, guiding the formulation of a detailed action plan to enhance cohesion.
3. Equality among nations and societal groups is essential for progress. Respectful treatment and bridging societal gaps foster participation, legitimacy, economic growth and resilience, bolstering democracy and global standing
4. Nationalistic tendencies fueled by local populists, particularly in areas of standard EU policy, must be addressed with a nuanced approach that respects the diverse tapestry of the EU while fostering unity. This includes creating educational programmes and public campaigns that highlight the benefits of unity and the dangers of divisive nationalism.
5. Disinformation threatens democratic trust, skewing public opinion. Strong regulations are needed. Transparency is crucial, supporting independent media and fact-checking. Yet, it's a long-term effort requiring steadfast solutions.
6. A code of conduct for EU politicians is essential, akin to that implemented for the 2024 EP elections, would help ensure that economic gains do not overshadow foundational principles and that the same rules are applied to all.
7. Engaging the youth is equally vital, addressing the frustrations stemming from unemployment and the need for relevant, independent education that prepares them for a rapidly evolving world.
8. The EU has to strike a balance between regulation and innovation, as well as flexibility and action-driven processes, to prosper economically and geopolitically.
9. Achieving a balance between unity and decision-making efficiency is a formidable challenge, especially when member states need a shared vision on matters of such weight as enlargement or strategic autonomy. The concerns of smaller states, feeling marginalised and holding divergent views on relations with prominent global actors like the USA, China and Russia, must be acknowledged and addressed to safeguard cohesion.
10. Campaigns promoting pro-EU narratives and building trust and support for EU initiatives require close cooperation with civil society actors. They can play a pivotal role in working with diverse communities, including minorities, the disabled and other underprivileged groups, to foster inclusion and bridge the gap between citizens and institutions.
11. Gender equality and the fight against poverty should be integrated into all EU policies, focusing on achieving tangible outcomes such as the universal ratification of the Istanbul Convention.
12. Migration and asylum policies must balance security and compassion while caring for cross-EU citizens' interests.
13. EU needs to review and encourage robust legislation at both national and EU levels to halt tendencies to neglect of universal principles when convenient and undermine fundamental norms and values, including human rights, minorities rights, access to non-bias education or free press
14. Lastly, addressing income disparities across EU states is vital. Wealthier nations should invest in the rule of law initiatives in less affluent regions, recognising it as crucial for EU stability. Transparent communication and citizen involvement will also ensure inclusivity and accountability throughout the process.
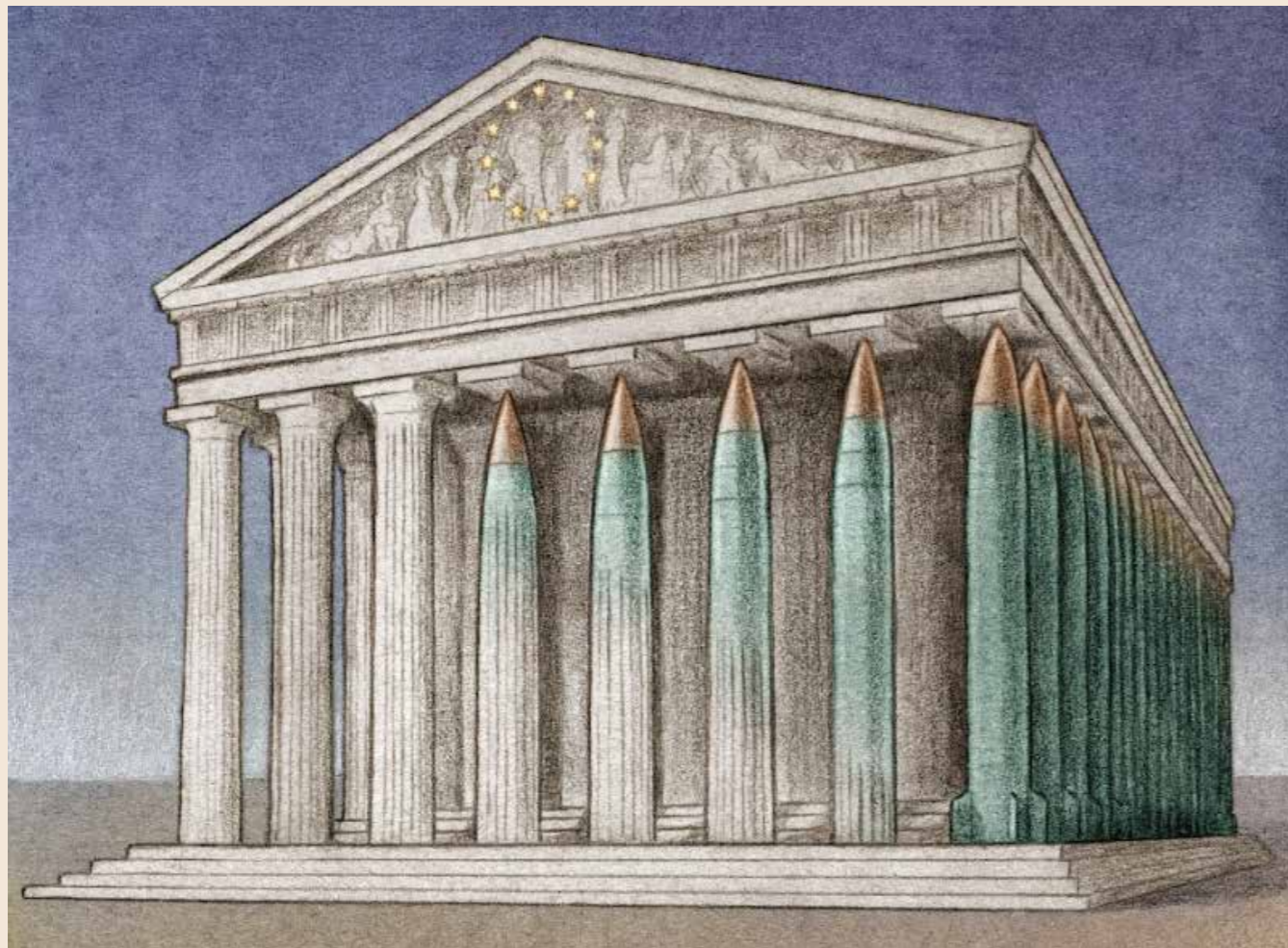
Scenarios

1

A Conservative Alliance of Convenience

A post-election Europe, where a populist surge sweeps across the member states, pushes the political compass firmly to the right. Nationalist sentiments rise, fueled by economic anxieties, immigration fears and cultural clashes. The European People's Party (EPP) is weaker and seeks to rebuild its core identity by shifting to the right and forming an alliance with the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR). Together, they champion a vision of Europe rooted in economic resilience and security.

The EU's survival hinges on pragmatism – even if it means curbing democratic excesses. Balancing realpolitik with ethical considerations, the EU engages only in quiet diplomacy to address human rights abuses, but public condemnations are toned down.

As the threat of the US isolating Europe remains high, the EU strengthens ties with other global partners.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine prompts EU states to prioritise defence over the Green Deal, emphasising economic security. Right-wing factions advocate for unified security objectives, reshaping industrial capabilities and forging new alliances. Ambitious proposals raise concerns about compromising democratic values amid the threat from Russia.

In time, the EU enhances defence capabilities for self-reliance, focusing on joint procurement, intelligence sharing, and coordinated strategies. While NATO remains crucial, the EU pursues ambitious industrial plans for collective defense. Its pragmatic foreign policy prioritises relevance in global shifts, balancing power projection with adherence to principles.

Under these circumstances, the EU's neighbourhood policy prioritises stability and security. It engages proactively with neighbouring regions, offering economic incentives and security cooperation.

As the curtain falls, the EU stands transformed: less democratic but more powerful.

This meets certain challenges that need to be addressed:

Democratic process hollowed out

- Both foreign and internal actors spread false information, undermining trust in democratic processes. Misinformation campaigns distort public opinion, sway elections, and slowly erode confidence in institutions.
- The perception that EU institutions are distant, out of touch, and lacking legitimacy poses a significant challenge. When citizens feel disconnected from decision-making centres, their engagement and participation wanes, and scepticism grows.
- A lack of participation leads to a perceived lack of legitimacy for elected representatives and weakened democratic accountability.
- When citizens are reduced to passive recipients of policies, their sense of agency diminishes.
- Feel-good campaigns initiated from the top fail to resonate with citizens. There is a lack of authentic engagement that requires a meaningful dialogue, transparency and responsiveness.
- When influenced by political agendas or biases, independent education is undermined, and critical thinking, civic awareness and informed decision-making suffer as a result.

Centralisation of judicial powers

- The key challenges related to the rule of law (RoL) in the context of evolving dynamics within the European Union (EU) impact the delicate balance between democratic principles, EU authority, and regional autonomy.
- EU centralisation can improve efficiency but may divert resources from regional needs. Formation of joint military forces and expanded bureaucracies can weaken national RoL.
- Differences in income levels across EU member states create a significant issue – wealthier countries are unwilling to allocate additional funds to support RoL initiatives in less affluent regions. This disparity affects the equitable application of justice and legal protections.
- Citizens in some regions may view EU institutions as distant and lacking legitimacy. When decisions are made that are far from local contexts, RoL can suffer. Non-transparent use of public funds puts away citizens' trust in the system.
- The EU is not fully committed to upholding RoL or imposing meaningful consequences when member states violate these principles. The EU is also increasingly reluctant to enforce procedures that would enhance the effectiveness of RoL.

Fundamental rights not for all

- Economic downturns exacerbate societal divisions, impacting civil society. Different groups and political parties may exploit the recession for their gain. However, political competition can also drive solutions, albeit with potential hasty decisions.
- The LGBTIQ+ communities face internal divisions heated by disinformation while their unity is crucial to safeguarding their rights against discrimination and prejudice.
- Migration and asylum policies often prioritise national interests over migrants' human rights. Balancing security and compassion remains a challenge, and every member state seeks its own way to solve the issue. Migrant groups lacking adequate rights are rejected for their well-being and dignity.
- With no efforts to improve their situation, disabled persons still encounter barriers to full participation in society.

Sovereignist consequences

- Minimal effort out to EU visibility among citizens or ensuring direct communication and engagement builds distrust and deters participation.
- A decline in democratic processes within the EU leads to the emergence of a populist leader akin to Trump. Safeguarding democratic norms is essential.
- Balancing unity and decision-making efficiency is challenging when Member States lack a common vision on enlargement and strategic autonomy. Smaller states feel marginalised, and differing views on EU relations with major actors threaten cohesion.
- There are issues with balancing digital sovereignty within the EU while addressing internal and external pressures.
- Regulatory frameworks impact the EU's competitive edge. It is deepening due to the lack of the right balance between regulation and innovation, as well as flexibility and action-driven processes.

2

A Democratic Renaissance

In a Europe where democracy thrives, the European Union emerges stronger, its power amplified by the collective voice of its citizens. Democratic forces can now reshape the EU's trajectory and build upon its successes.

The 2024 European Parliament elections yield a diverse yet cohesive coalition. Projections favour a scenario where EPP and SD together with Renew and Greens receive a strong support and form an alliance covering 435 seats. Together, they champion climate action, social justice, and economic reforms.

The coalition streamlines decision-making, aligning policies with citizens' needs to enhance EU legitimacy. Commitment to democratic values strengthens EU institutions, fostering transparency, accountability and citizen participation.

Ursula von der Leyen retains her position as Commission President. Her leadership ensures continuity and her pragmatic approach bridges ideological divides. She champions digital sovereignty, AI ethics, fair taxation, and new investments. The EU's focus on economic growth, innovation, and sustainability pays off with new jobs, enhanced research funding, and green investments. And the fair trade agreements become paramount, balancing economic interests and values.

Joint military projects enhance security as the EU's defence capabilities improve. Cooperation between member states deepens, enabling joint action on global security challenges, including larger support to Ukraine. The EU supports Ukraine's territorial integrity, imposing further sanctions on an imploding Russia. Ukraine prevails slowly but its successes against Russia bolster the EU's position of trust in the neighbourhood.

Strategic agenda, adaptable to immediate challenges, endures while the EU becomes a global player. The EU stands as a beacon of democracy, wielding soft power globally. Its democratic resilience shapes a world where more EU power means a more stable and interconnected global order and stability.

The picture might not only be colourful and flip quickly, thus it is crucial to use the positive momentum and build resilient systems by addressing possible challenges ahead of time. Addressing these will strengthen democracy, foster active participation, and uphold the values of the EU.

Safeguards to EU Democracy

- The EU's commitment to democracy is slowly being revitalised and given new stimuli. Initiatives such as the European Democracy Action Plan aim to enhance democratic resilience.

- The stronger EU is subject to an enhanced proliferation of misinformation and disinformation that undermines trust in democratic processes. False narratives sway public opinion and erode confidence in institutions. The EU is working tirelessly to strengthen regulations and combat misinformation. Ensuring transparency and adding funding schemes for independent media or fact-checking allows accountability and trust, but the work is systemic and requires reliable and long-term solutions.

- By engaging independent organisations to play a critical role in real-time monitoring and countering harmful content, by digital literacy up-skilling and media literacy education, the EU is ready to give swift responses to disinformation and therefore maintain an informed electorate especially among younger generations

Balancing Sovereignty and Accountability

- Responding to the key challenges related to the rule of law and the need for legislation to prevent national interference in norms and values plays a pivotal role in preserving RoL, preventing national overreach, and fostering a collective commitment to democratic values across the EU.

- As some EU member states exhibit tendencies to undermine fundamental norms and values, including human rights, education, and freedom of the press (e.g., Hungary's disregard for LGBTIQ+ rights), a lack of robust legislation at both national and EU levels will further allow such interference and neglect of universal principles when convenient.

- Missing out on introducing clear legal mechanisms to address non-compliance to RoL and strengthening the stance against violations will erode commitment to adhere to shared norms. However, the new legislation must address a balance between national sovereignty and collective commitments to stay valid. Where necessary, regular monitoring and open-to-public reporting will contribute to transparency and enhanced accountability.

Balancing Carrots and Sticks for Fundamental Rights

- Failing to establish a robust system that rewards compliance with fundamental rights, the EU is observing more and more violations that hinder its accountability.

- It ensures some incentives (carrots) and some penalties (sticks) to uphold fundamental rights, but they still lack teeth and are easily used in populist games.

- In multicultural Europe, focus shifts to managing growing migration influxes and promoting assimilation for workforce integration. EU-funded programmes aim to reduce systemic barriers and provide equal opportunities for minority communities. Efforts include amplifying minority voices and fostering inclusive content creation in media and social spaces to promote understanding and empathy.

- A more representative media landscape fosters understanding and empathy across diverse communities. EU-funded projects should promote diverse and inclusive media content to protect free speech while ensuring independence from undue influence.

- A well-defined approach promotes equity and dismantles discriminatory practices by developing comprehensive strategies for minority inclusion and addressing systemic barriers so that equal access to opportunities is ensured.

Competitive Edge Erosion Due to Regulatory Setup

- The EU's military capabilities, whether at the EU level or combined across member states, remain modest. Yet, defence expenditures are substantial. The EU is balancing defence investments with other strategic priorities. The efficient resource allocation seems harder than expected.

- The EU's regulatory environment hinders innovation and economic dynamism. Overregulation gradually stifles growth and competitiveness, while the Commission struggles to produce a well-defined strategy that fosters and balances innovation, competitiveness, and security.

SCENARIO

—— 3 ——

Fractured European Horizons

High polarisation persists across member states, fuelled by nationalist sentiments and divergent visions for Europe's future. Populist movements gain ground, challenging the traditional party structures. The once-stable European Union now grappled with internal divisions, hindering its ability to address global challenges effectively.

In polarised societies, the votes are almost equally split, extorting a broad-based coalition formed by the EPP and the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), supplemented by Renew Europe and the Greens—altogether taking 382 seats.

As the EPP, European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), Renew Europe, and the Greens try to unite, their diverse ideologies find convergence in strengthening democratic institutions. This coalition manages economic growth, innovation, and environmental sustainability well. The ECR's pragmatism balances the Greens' idealism, but the fragility of constant consensus makes the EU focus on its own internal affairs and sustaining the union rather than expansion.

In this future, the EU navigates internal complexities while striving for resilience, unity, and a renewed commitment to democratic values.

By taking rule of law breaches seriously, it does not compromise principles over political interests. Conditionality is strictly attached to more financing schemes, and the Commission is united to fight any disinformation campaigns, strengthen media and civil society, and empower local actors to answer problems they find most relevant in local communities.

The EU's global ambitions are curtailed - once a global beacon EU recalibrates to its own house and narrows the agenda when internal challenges consume attention. While the conflict in Ukraine escalates, and despite efforts to decoupling from Russia and China, the EU finds itself entangled in the aftermaths of the Russo-Ukrainian War. Reconstruction efforts strained resources, and the burden weighed heavily on the bloc. The war-torn eastern regions of Ukraine require substantial aid, testing the EU's commitment to solidarity and stability. This easily fuels non-enlargement sentiments.

In this complex security and economic landscape, nurturing democracy demands collective resolve and adaptive strategies. Several challenges loom large:

Quick Policy Fixes Fueling Populism

- As citizens demand immediate solutions to any amd all problems, the preference for populist leaders, who promise swift change, slowly grows. The allure of simple answers undermines democratic deliberation and basic governmental processes.
- Scepticism toward ineffective and polarised political institutions grows, weakening democratic legitimacy.
- Deprived of consistent civic education, the citizens are apathetic and disillusioned which hinders their participation.
- Left-wing economic narratives struggle to resonate. Inequalities are becoming a pressing challenge.
- Young pro-EU voter turnout declines due to the absence of meaningful employment opportunities and a sense of fulfilment in life. Consequently, the EU overlooks opportunities to engage and empower youth by enhancing education, fostering skill development and promoting job creation initiatives.
- Missteps and policies affecting freedoms erode trust. Popularity grows for inclusive decision-making forums, such as "Citizen Assemblies," which can harness citizen input and strengthen local democratic processes but are vulnerable to populist influences.

Deepening Split on Attitudes

- Ongoing discussions reveal divergent views on the rule of law versus democracy—prolonged discussions without meaningful breakthroughs due to the lack of consensus hamper effective implementation.
- The absence of clear mechanisms of responsibility weakens the system's integrity and creates accountability gaps.
- The RoL intrudes into domestic democratic affairs and interferes with national democratic processes. Legal norms and democratic autonomy need balance.

Crackdowns on safeguarding fundamental rights

- Further underrepresentation of women in politics and policies in a strong-men European world is visible. Despite modest progress, women remain underrepresented in political decision-making, which deepens gender disparities.
- The EU's failure to universally ratify the Istanbul Convention undermines efforts against gender-based violence.
- Policies affecting citizens' freedoms or limiting their ability to act erode fundamental rights.
- Crackdowns on media and the rise of disinformation threaten democratic discourse. Protecting media independence and promoting media literacy become urgent imperatives.

Financial Struggles Amid Frozen Ukraine Conflict

- Citizens prioritise economic stability over abstract freedoms. Balancing strategic interests with humanitarian concerns is challenging. Supporting Ukraine's defence without escalating tensions requires finesse
- While NATO provides security, overreliance risks strategic imbalance. The EU needs a clear vision to complement NATO's role or enhance its own capabilities.
- More inner-European regionalisation for military capabilities is viewed as key for defence capabilities. Regional groups (e.g., the Nordics or Visegrad states) may enhance interoperability within a European framework.
- Enlargement introduces complexities, making unified EU voices harder to achieve. Hardships of supporting Ukraine also contribute to Member states' divergent views and understanding of EU's enlargement and strategic sovereignty.

4

Shadows of the Union: A Post-Election Odyssey

Mid-2024 Europe found itself at a crossroads. The European Parliament elections had unleashed a tectonic rupture that threatened the very foundations of the European Union. Anti-systemic parties, once relegated to the fringes, now clawed their way into the spotlight. Their platforms resonated with disillusioned citizens, promising radical change, dismantling the establishment, and challenging the status quo.

In the hallowed halls of the European Parliament, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) emerged as the dark horse. Their victory sent shockwaves through the continent. The AfD's triumph in the 2024 EU elections projected their ascent to power in the following German federal elections (2025). Their nationalist fervour, anti-immigrant stance and promises of economic revival struck a chord with disenchanted voters. The AfD's rise was inexorable—a harbinger of a new era.

Russia's ill-fated invasion had stalled, but peace remained elusive. The world watched as the war's end brought no triumph, only weary sighs. Ukraine's dreams of sovereignty lay buried in the trenches.

EU borders are strained as migrants surge, seeking refuge from war-torn lands. The EU's solidarity becomes fractured—nations erect walls, both physical and metaphorical. The Schengen Agreement waveres, and the dream of a borderless Europe fades.

Across Europe, right-wing narratives thrive both at the national and EU levels. The Kremlin and prolonged problematic situations in the East easily fuel disinformation campaigns. National elections became battlegrounds for fabricated narratives, weaponised hashtags, and manipulated videos. Democracy trembled—the atomic bomb of disinformation detonated.

Climate change took a backseat. The once-urgent battle against rising temperatures yielded to a more immediate crisis: energy poverty. The Green Deal became a relic, replaced by pragmatic survival.

The EU quaked as the far right and radical left found common ground to dismantle the establishment and defy the status quo. The times will be challenging.

Attack on European Democracy

- External and internal threats challenge the stability of EU democratic nations. Disinformation campaigns, polarisation, and erosion of trust pose significant risks. Citizens' lack of trust in politicians and media undermines democratic engagement.

- Limited room for civil society organisations hampers their role in advocating for democratic values.
- The European Commission often focused on countering attacks rather than proactively strengthening democratic institutions. Prioritising national or regional identities over a European one challenges cultivating a shared European political identity essential for democratic cohesion.
- Migration and labour crises within the EU bring security concerns
- Misinformation from foreign and internal actors distorts public discourse and adds up to growing polarisation.
- Perception of "traditional" European Values brings about different interpretations of European values that impact democratic cohesion.

Toxic Solidarity and Strategic Patience

- Lack of consensus on its scope and application hampers the effective implementation of the rule of law. In the already delicate balance between RoL and democratic processes, heated debates and tensions hinder democratic decision-making.
- Some perceive RoL as more critical than democracy itself. This ideological clash makes societies polarise further.
- The lack of meaningful consequences for RoL violations within member states weakens the EU's commitment to upholding standards. Tolerance toward "rule breakers" undermines RoL and accountability.
- Cumbersome application processes delay RoL enforcement. Streamlining corrective measures is necessary, but the circumstances are not favourable.
- Safeguarding RoL while maintaining democratic vitality requires nuanced approaches and swift action.

Weaponising Democratic principles

- LGBTIQ+ and minority communities are exploited for divisive narratives during elections and further. This undermines their rights and fuels polarisation.
- Racism is on the rise, threatening equal rights and social cohesion.

- Authorities targeting NGOs and media restrict freedom of expression. Fear of reprisals hampers their work.
- Disinformation campaigns destabilise democratic societies. Media independence is compromised due to financial pressures.
- Overburdened justice systems may compromise reliability and access to justice.

Weak Leadership - Weak Position

- Disparate national interests can hinder collective action. Without strong political will, strategic autonomy and commitment to EU goals remain elusive.
- Disagreements on key issues and diverse cultural, historical, and economic contexts can strain cohesion when unity is vital for strategic autonomy and resilience. Lack of consensus through dialogue and compromise brings chaos.
- Effective leadership and visionary leaders who prioritise EU interests are essential for strategic decision-making. Weak leadership undermines EU influence.
- Disagreements on key issues weaken the EU's collective voice. Unity is essential for strategic autonomy.
- Enlargement introduces diverse perspectives and dissensus risk. Achieving unanimity becomes harder, affecting strategic coherence.
- Authoritarian leaders prioritise national interests over shared values. Cooperation may be opportunistic, and a new autocratic US leader may alter relations with the EU and influence economic ties.
- For EU leaders, it is not clear that supporting Ukraine's sovereignty is a strategic imperative. A weak EU response risks Ukraine's stability and raises dependence on Russia and China.
- Non-democratic EU leadership may compromise principles for economic gains, whilst upholding democratic values while engaging with China is essential.
- Anti-EU sentiments weaken unity. Navigating such discourse is crucial for strategic autonomy.

Background Data and Research

EU Demographic Shifts
Data sets

How will different generations vote in the European elections?

Historically, older voters have dominated European elections due to ageing electorates across the EU states and relatively low participation among the youth. These two factors will shape the demographic landscape of the 2024 European elections.

Ageing electorates across the EU, 2019 vs. 2022

In 2019, during the previous EU elections, the median age for the EU population stood at 43.7. By 2022, this figure had risen to 44.4 (up 0.7 years). Over the period between 2019 and 2022, the median age in Central European states experienced a similar upward trend. In 2022, Hungary's median age was the highest among the four countries, at 43.9 (up 0.9 from 43 in 2019). In 2022, it reached 43.8 in Czechia (up 1.2 from 42.6 in 2019), 42 in Poland (up 1 from 41 in 2019), and 41.8 in Slovakia (up 1.2 from 40.6 in 2019).

Voter turnout in the 2019 European elections by age

For the EU28, total voter turnout in the 2019 European elections reached 50.66%: 41.50% for the citizens in the 18-24 age group, 46.90% for 25-39 year-olds, 51.60% for 40-54 year-olds and 54.30% for 55+ age group. Generally, the 2019 European elections saw a much larger turnout among youth and first-time voters. Compared to the 2014 elections, turnout was significant among youth under 25 years (42%, up 14 pp) and 25-39 year-olds (47%, up 12 pp).

Poland

In Poland, total turnout was below the EU28 average, at 45.70%; at 35.40% for voters in the 18-24 age group, 40.20% for 25-39 year-olds, 45.50% for the 40-54, and 52.70 for 55+.

Hungary

In Hungary, total turnout was lower than in Poland, at 43.30%; at 36.20% for voters in the 18-24 age group, 37.40% for 25-39 year-olds, 46.70% for the 40-54, and 46.40 for 55+.

Czechia and Slovakia

Czechia and Slovakia had the lowest turnout rates among the EU states and meagre turnout rates for the 18-24 age group. In Czechia, total turnout was below the EU28 average, at 28.70%; at 15.70% for voters in the 18-24 age group, 25.70% for 25-39 year-olds, 29.30% for the 40-54 and 33.20% for 55+. In Slovakia, total turnout was at 22.70% at 10.40% for voters in the 18-24 age group, 21.70% for 25-39 year-olds, 25.40% for the 40-54, and 25.30% for 55+.

How do different generations vote in the EU?

Now that we understand the voting patterns across different generations in the EU and Central Europe, it would be helpful to learn more about the trends in voting behaviours of these different generations across the EU.

Generally, in the 2019 European elections, support for the centre-right EPP and national conservative ECR tends to increase with the age of the voter. In contrast, the Greens/EFA and left-wing GUE/NGL groups are more favoured by younger voters. The centre-right European People's Party (EPP) parties tend to be stronger among the oldest EU generations. In the 2019 elections, they came first in all age groups above 30. Among the voters under 30, they came second and garnered less than 20%. Among voters above 70, the EPP parties scored more than 30% support. For the youngest generation, voters under 30, the centre-left S&D was the strongest.

For the youngest generation, voters under 30, the center-left S&D emerged as the strongest. The liberal ALDE parties were equally influential across all age groups, whereas the Greens/EFA parties garnered significantly more support among young voters than older ones. Specifically, 16% of 18 to 25-year-olds voted for Greens/EFA, whereas only 4% of those aged 70 and above did so

The right-wing ENF/EAPN produced one of the most surprising voting behaviour trends across different age groups. Support for the right doubled from 18 to 35, plateaued until 60, and then sharply declined back to 8% among those aged 60 and above. This trend remained consistent across all countries with ENF/EAPN presence.

National-conservative ECR parties, on the other hand, were particularly favoured among older voters. Below the age of 35, only 5% of EU voters cast their ballots for an ECR party. However, this percentage rises to more than 10% among those 65 and older.

These general trends are consistent with what happened in Poland in the 2019 European elections. According to the Ipsos poll, conservative Law and Justice (PiS), was the most popular among the youngest and oldest generations: 18-29 year-olds (29%), 50-59 year-olds (49%), and voters aged 60+ (53.1%). Centrist and liberal European Coalition, made up of the Civic Platform (PO), Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), Polish People's Party (PSL), the Greens, and Modern, was the most popular for voters in the 30-39 age group (38.3%) and for 40-49 year-olds (44%).

The right-wing Konfederacja and leftist Wiosna have garnered higher support among the youth of 18-29 than the average: in that group, 18.6% voted for Konfederacja and 13.8% for Wiosna. In the European Parliament, the mandates of these largest political groups in Poland are distributed as follows: Law and Justice mandates go over to the right-wing European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), European Coalition's mandates to European People's Party (EPP) and Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), and Wiosna's to S&D.

Although there was significant support for the right-wing Konfederacja among the youth, as the party received a total of 4.55% of the vote in the elections, which is less than the required threshold of 5%, none of its members were elected to the European Parliament.

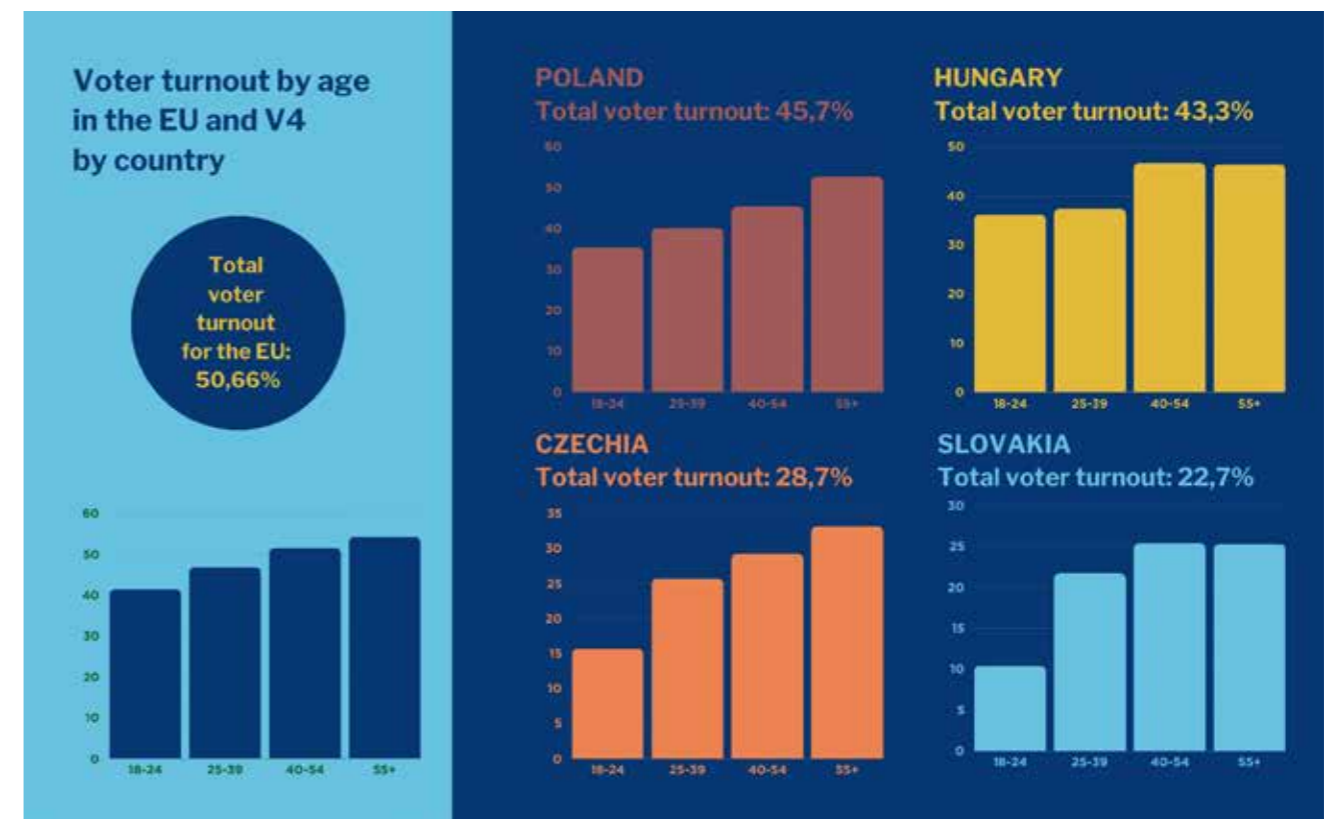### Voting behaviour trends for different age groups by country

Based on how different age groups voted in the recent parliamentary elections in individual countries, we may be able to assess how these voting behaviours could shape up in the upcoming European Parliament elections.

In Poland's 2023 parliamentary elections, the centrist Koalicja Obywatelska (KO) emerged as the most popular choice among the youngest voters aged 18-29, securing 27.6% of their support. Following closely behind, the centre-left Third Way garnered 17.9%, while the right-wing Konfederacja and the Left received 17.8% and 17.4% respectively. Law and Justice (PiS) ranked as the least favoured among this age group, with 14.4% of their support. Among 30-year-olds, Koalicja Obywatelska obtained 28.8%, with Law and Justice coming in second at 25.7%. Third Way followed with 18.3%, while Konfederacja and the Left received 11.8% and 10.4% respectively.

A similar trend persisted for the 40-49 age group: KO secured 34.5%, PiS obtained 31.6%, Third Way received 16.5%, and Konfederacja garnered 5.2%.

Among older demographics, PiS emerges as the dominant party. It secured 43.7% of the votes from those in their 50s, while KO garnered 32.3%, Third Way 12.9%, the Left 5.1%, and Konfederacja 3.2%. PiS enjoyed its widest margin in the 60-plus generation, with over half (52.8%) of voters. KO maintained 31% support, consistent with the overall population, but the other parties fared poorly: Third Way received 8.2%, the Left 5.2%, and the Konfederacja 1.1%.

Voter turnout by age in the EU and V4 by country

Total voter turnout for the EU: 50,66%

POLAND Total voter turnout: 45,7%

HUNGARY Total voter turnout: 43,3%

CZECHIA Total voter turnout: 28,7%

SLOVAKIA Total voter turnout: 22,7%

Trust in the European Parliament

Gábor Berczeli

EU institutions, including the European Parliament, tend to garner a relatively high level of trust from citizens.

To cross over 50% in trust levels is a big deal, and that is where it currently peaks for the EU. For comparison, national governments and parliaments trail by over 10% on average in the same metric.

Of course, only 16% of people across the EU strongly agree with the statement that "I trust statistics and data provided by Eurostat"; however, we do have a bit more data on perceptions from the demographic group of the youth, whose participation levels are steadily rising. It appears that young people have an increasingly positive image of the EP (from 32% ahead of 2019 to 37% ahead of the 2024 elections), would actually like to see the EP play a more important role (58%) and also have a generally growing satisfaction with democracy in the EU (from 55% ahead of 2019 to 61% ahead of the 2024 elections). The trends are very clearly positive, aligning well with the popular sentiment (70%) that the European Union is still an island of peace and stability in a turbulent and unsafe world.

The Dynamics of the European Parliament

Looking at what the European Parliament does and how it will take on its role in the next cycle, we should first and foremost examine its legislative role. The last 5-years involved a cycle of 705 MEPs and staff working on around 10,000 different documents, though not all of these were legislative, strictly speaking. Up to 250 draft bills are still outstanding, with only one final plenary session left for voting.

The outcomes of the elections will not just materialise in the division of votes but will also influence the distribution of committee positions and places, rapporteurships for the concrete legislative files, speaking times by these functions, as well as financial resources for all the EP's procedures.

Power and influence over the next term is likely to be concentrated around a standard centrist coalition with EPP, S&D and Renew at its core. Although they are expected to do very well in the elections, populist and far-right parties will ultimately not attain much influence as a result of resource distribution procedures. With

at least a three-way coalition needed, compromises will take time, and in the co-decision procedure, the challenge will be to come to an agreement with the Council. It is the non-centrist heads of state and government that will be the spoilers and breakers.

In any case, the EP is different from national parliaments in terms of political group discipline and dynamics. Of course, without any group holding a majority and given the specific relationship between the three institutions of Council, Commission and Parliament, there is no government–opposition logic.

Group cohesion and discipline are also different. While statistically, it is difficult to split more than 10-15 MEPs' votes from their own group line, the members have leeway in many ways. On certain pertinent issues, national delegations can still play a strong role.

Also, with so many parliamentary activities - from resolutions to public hearings and missions - there are plenty of opportunities for MEPs to act more like ballerinas than team players. They can champion very

specific "personal" issues without those coming from a group agenda, and although the activities above may have limited consequences, this is how the MEPs own a topic and make a name for themselves. Expect even more frantic, low-key initiatives vying for media attention from the many members who are sidelined from the impactful posts with real legislative influence.

This will also play out in the second key role of the EP: to control institutional appointments, especially members of the European Commission. In the previous two elections, a so-called Spitzenkandidat model was proposed for a deeper Europeanisation of the process, where the euro parties would first conduct their primary processes and then propose lead candidates for their campaigns for President of the European Commission.

This is how Jean-Claude Juncker won his position in 2014. In 2019, however, the opposition raised by Macron, Manfred Weber, was not accepted by heads of state and government in the Council. Both he and the socialist lead candidate Frans Timmermans were therefore passed over for another compromise option from the EPP, Ursula von der Leyen, who hadn't even run for a seat in Parliament. While Parliament has had progressively growing influence and powers over the years, this was a clear setback. Currently, we can pronounce the Spitzenkandidat process dead and note the significant erosion of the presidential election's significance.

The currently expected lead candidate of the EPP, Ursula von der Leyen, is again not running in the election for democratic legitimacy in her own right. Similarly, though less significantly, the S&D has also put forward a lead candidate not running for an MEP seat, namely Nicolas Schmit of Luxembourg. That makes the Council's ultimate power clear.

There is also still the vetting of the individual commissioner candidates of the Member States. With a more fragmented Parliament (see below), combined with a defensive Parliament eager to assert its control and stand up to Member States, the vetting might proceed well into the autumn. A longtime caretaker Commission and the slow setup of the EU institutions in a critical time certainly make the EU a weaker actor.

Third, there is the "power of the purse" which comes into play when Parliament votes on the budget to match any policy field ambitions. Expect prolonged compromise processes where horse trading does not bode well for upholding the existing standards of democracy.

Future Scenarios for the European Parliament

All of these key functions of Parliament - including budgeting, appointments and legislation - promise to become more lengthy affairs than before, irrespective of the configuration of party coalitions.

In the ultimate decision-making dynamics, the prolonged struggles for Parliamentary majorities, a bad feeling from the sinking of the Spitzenkandidat concept and populist or far-right spoilers in the Council suggest a new Commission might only be set up well into the autumn, enabling a scenario Shadows of the Union.

However, the prism of electoral results can also produce important forecasts. In terms of our quadrant of scenarios, the Democratic Renaissance would be facilitated by the unlikely outcome of strengthened and ideologically reconcilable S&D and Renew groups, making them the comfortable core of the next majorities.

In the current legislature, such a "left" coalition together with the Greens and the Left still holds a 52.62% margin. In the next cycle, however, it is projected to fall to a hopeless 41.25%, according to Politico, and that does not incorporate the possibility of losing any member parties (such as ANO). At that point, no amount of undisciplined votes from other MEPs would help, and such a coalition would need a kingmaker from a different (centre) "right" group, which sinks the idea of the left's leadership.

A core of the EPP and ECR could also appear much like in the pre-Brexit days of an EPP-ED Group; however, the current conservative gathering has very different credentials. Holding their nose, the EPP might compromise democracy for a right coalition but make a stronger Europe in the Conservative Alliance of Convenience scenario. They could refocus from new ambitions, such as the Green Deal, to the more traditional core competencies, including industrial policy or more interest in enlargement.

The unlikely worst-case scenario, "Shadows of the Union", is represented by a surprisingly high turnout for populist and fringe parties of all colours (watch those country turnout polls in the Netherlands, Greece, Romania, France or Italy), the wunderwaffe of malign foreign interference and badly damaged mainstream parties way beyond the commonly projected seat losses (today: EPP -2, S&D -7, Renew -19).
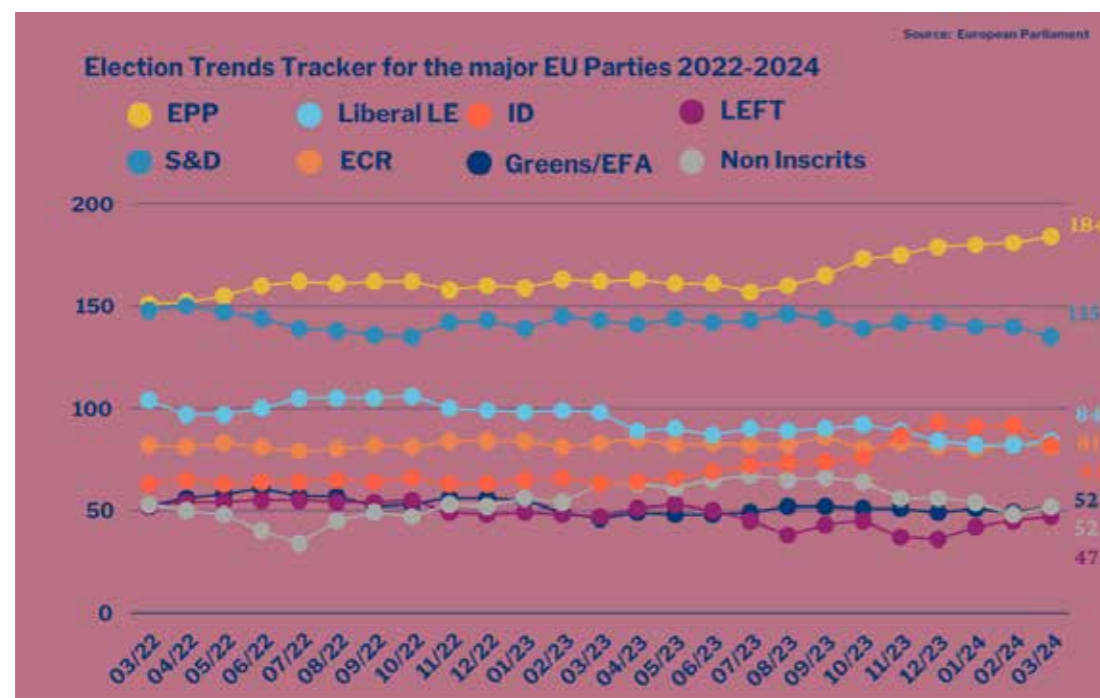
Nonetheless, the maths still do not add up if we start from moderate projections for the ID group at 85 and ECR at 76 seats. For a monster coalition on the right, despite any extraordinary results, the EPP would still be needed, and that is not going to happen.

Driven by the surge of the fringes and the possible external impulse of a Trump administration overseas, what we will likely see is the closing of ranks between S&D, Renew and EPP at the centre for the Fractured European Horizons scenario with the EPP as kingmaker.

These groups can see eye to eye on fundamentals and on quarantining the populist right; however, their visions for Europe are too different to result in robust policies and the much-coveted strategic autonomy. Remember, such rallying around the centre (with backroom power sharing) also drove the Europe of "muddling through" crises. Nonetheless, this is still the most realistic outcome and the one to start planning for.

Based on the general tendency of power shifting to the right, any potential coalitions between the EPP, Renew, and ECR in the same scenario may also hinge on any movement of parties between the political groups, with Orbán's FIDESZ in ECR perhaps acting as a spoiler.

This leads to one disclaimer: of course, we do not yet know the future composition of the parliamentary groups, with some parties likely to change teams. For example, a sizable FIDESZ delegation joining ECR could trigger the Sweden Democrats to leave. We also don't know if ANO will stay in Renew or the next possible home of SMER. In any case, even though the fringe/anti-systemic/populist parties will gain an alarming record number of seats, they will have no breakthrough and occupation of Brussels. Outside majority coalitions and maybe even parliamentary groups, their real impact will remain marginal.

Election Trends Tracker for the major EU Parties 2022-2024

Source: European Parliament

EPP · Liberal LE · ID · LEFT · S&D · ECR · Greens/EFA · Non Inscrits

Urgent Need for Substantial Strengthening of EU Democracy and EU Power

Tobias Spöri

The European Union is confronting a confluence of crises arising from global trends, internal challenges and the inadequacy of EU institutions in effectively addressing threats to EU democracy. While the outlook may appear daunting, there are opportunities to avert a loss of EU influence and a decline in EU democracy.

However, achieving this necessitates a paradigm shift in the EU's crisis management approach, advocating for a more decentralised and inclusive strategy.

Concerns and Challenges

The current state of the EU, in anticipation of the European Parliamentary Elections in 2024 and potential scenarios for the upcoming EP cycle, was deliberated during a strategic foresight workshop with experts from eight EU member states.

Participants expressed widespread concern about the unprecedented pressure on, and potential demise of, the rule-based world order established after the Second World War. European democracy is under siege from both external and internal forces, presenting a severe challenge to address simultaneously. Authoritarianism is on the ascent globally, with major players like Russia, China and the Gulf States positioning themselves as alternative, supposedly more efficient, regimes for organising the state, economy and society.

Of particular concern is the rise of authoritarianism within the EU, notably in Hungary, undermining the EU's

portrayal as a democratic stronghold and adversely impacting its global legitimacy.

European democracy is also under internal threat, marked by a decline in open society values, the proliferation of racism and growing intolerance. Participants voiced apprehension about narratives openly opposing European values, especially regarding minority rights.

Experts observed a "nationalisation of human rights", where a growing segment of society no longer supports the universal character of basic rights. In some member states, political actors exploit minorities, such as refugees or the LGBTIQA+ community, to foster polarisation by intertwining this with anti-EU narratives and placing ethnic or sexual minorities under heightened pressure.

Participants also noted an escalating trend of intimidation and threats against media and NGOs in some EU member states, resulting in a shrinking space for civil society and democracy. Concerns regarding low voter turnout, particularly in eastern member states, were raised, posing a potential threat to the legitimacy of European democracy. Additionally, low trust in political actors and the media increases susceptibility to disinformation among EU citizens.

Furthermore, participants expressed concern about developments within the EU. Pessimism is linked to several EU-level issues, with experts highlighting the lack of consequences at the EU level in addressing the rule of law breaches in member states as a key concern. Doubts were raised about the strength of political

will and social cohesion among member states to address the myriad crises effectively.

With the likelihood of EU enlargement in the next decade, participants foresaw increased risks of dissensus and challenges in presenting a unified front. Criticisms were directed at the EU's tendency to launch top-down feel-good campaigns, such as the Conference on the Future of Europe, which fail to resonate with citizens and do little to dispel the perception that EU institutions are distant from the people.

The EU received general criticism for its top-down approach to handling issues and challenges. One key issue raised was the EU Commission's mindset, which tends to focus on combating attacks against European democracy rather than actively strengthening EU democracy. Another crucial concern was the lack of a shared vision for the future of the EU.

Strengthening the Democratic Basis in the EU through Investment and Local Initiatives

Such a new vision for the EU should not emerge through an "alienated, top-down process" like the Conference on the Future of Europe, which failed to deliver on its initial promises. Many participants emphasised the need for increased investment in the pillars of European democracy beyond traditional institutions. The workshop advocated empowering local actors closer to the population and the issues at hand. While the EU already funds various projects, additional financial support is required to protect EU democracy. This involves funding

independent media and civil society actors supporting EU democracy.

The EU should augment the budget for projects addressing EU democracy while simultaneously empowering these actors through programs and professional training. Focusing on local initiatives supporting minorities, participation and civic education can establish a solid foundation for strengthening EU democracy from the grassroots level.

Participants proposed that funding opportunities for local initiatives should be less bureaucratic, less project-based and less short-term, promoting financial security for initiatives supporting EU democracy. Local initiatives offer the potential for exchanging best practices and scalable actions, ranging from citizen science approaches to media vouchers for democratic media. Additionally, emphasis should be placed on engaging young people.

Safeguarding EU Democracy within the EU through Actual Red Lines

The second set of proposals focused on democracy within the EU and in EU member states in the context of another EU enlargement round on the horizon. The EU needs to develop mechanisms and strategies to uphold democracy and the rule of law not only before accession but also internally.

Reinforcing EU norms internally is crucial for enhancing EU coherence and bolstering external power. Existing tools, such as Article 7, need to be actively utilised and conditionality should be more closely tied to financing schemes.

Participants advocated for increased use of economic tools to "coerce" autocrats, establishing clear red lines that cannot be crossed without consequences. In the context of EU enlargement, participants stressed the need for a reversed perspective, where joining the EU is not the ultimate goal but rather a structured and systematic transformation aligning with EU values.

Increasing EU Power through Regionalisation

The EU's military capacities are ill-equipped to address upcoming challenges, particularly if relying solely on NATO in the face of potential shifts in the US presidency. Participants recommended strengthening military capacities and interoperability through the creation of regional corps and trusted partnerships among EU members.

Examples such as the first German-Dutch Corps were cited as models. Regional military hubs, situated in northern EU member states or the Visegrád states, could further enhance decentralised, regionalised military forces, enabling
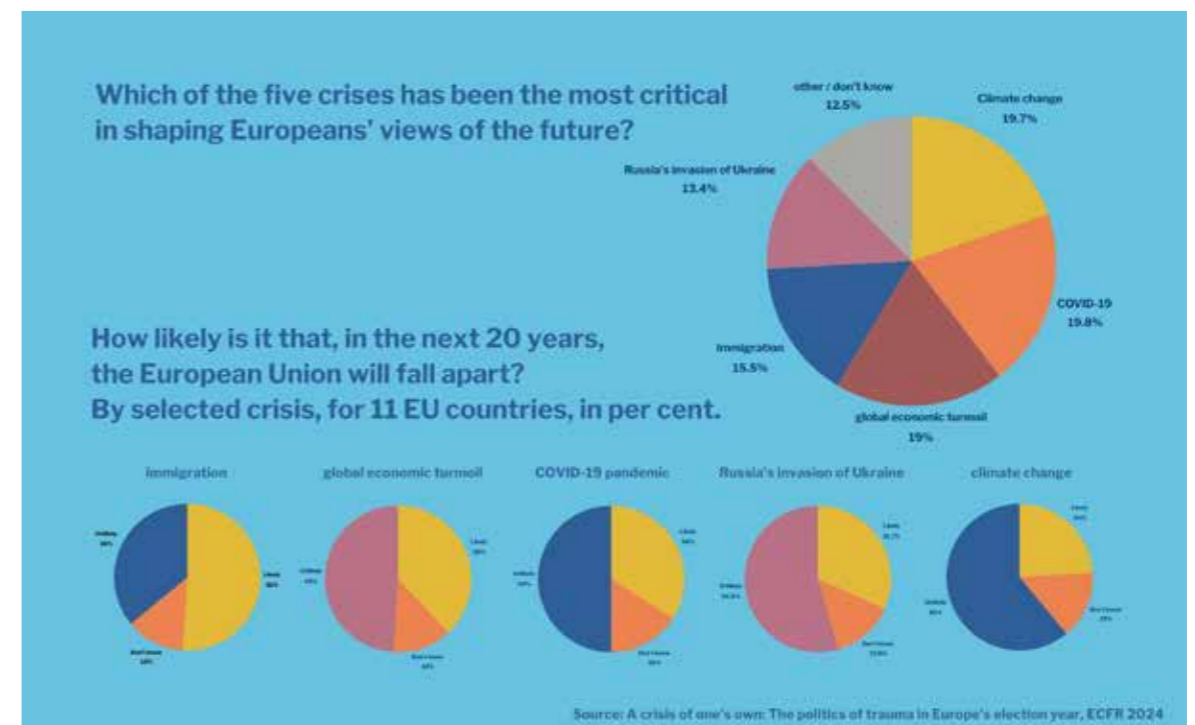
the EU to act more independently from NATO or the US.

To achieve this, participants stressed the importance of a clear vision for the structure and equipment of European forces, with strategic autonomy in military terms identified as a key goal for upcoming EU representatives after the EU election.

Swift actions needed to fortify EU democracy and global influence

The European Union grapples with internal and external threats, necessitating urgent reforms. Concerns include the erosion of democratic values, the rise of authoritarianism and inadequate crisis management.

To counter this, a decentralised, inclusive strategy is crucial. Proposals focus on empowering local actors, increasing financial investment and enforcing red lines for democracy. A shared vision and redefined perspectives on EU enlargement are essential. Additionally, it is proposed that military limitations are addressed through regionalisation.

In essence, these concise recommendations call for swift action to fortify EU democracy and global influence.

Which of the five crises has been the most critical in shaping Europeans' views of the future?

How likely is it that, in the next 20 years, the European Union will fall apart? By selected crisis, for 11 EU countries, in per cent.

Source: A crisis of one's own: The politics of trauma in Europe's election year, ECFR 2024

Less Democracy, Less EU: A Cautionary Tale for Europe in 2024
Radu Albu-Comănescu

into a subsidiary of unfriendly powers. From populist, illiberal influencers, the ECR-ID groups have a decent chance of becoming the trend-setters of European fragmentation - in more than one field.

Corrosion, the Right Way

The next five years will be crucially transformative for Europe, not because of leadership, direction and drive (these are visibly absent), but because of an international context imposing decisive choices.

As the anti-Bruxelles trend gains momentum, a Parliament dominated by ECR-ID could follow the advice of national governments, refraining from supporting Ukraine by increasingly siding "with peace", insisting on negotiations and multiplying storylines that serve the Kremlin's intention to keep Western Europe uninvolved in "what could lead to WW3 and nuclear holocaust". The diminishment of military support for Kyiv, under different pretexts, is hardly excluded; voices already ask for limits to be applied even to humanitarian aid.

In addition, such a Parliament would certainly leave a mark on EU enlargement to the Western Balkans, Moldova and Ukraine. The process could freeze or be abandoned using the old refrains of the nationalist, conservative Right: "too corrupt, too unprepared, too much a vector of geopolitical risk or of social dumping".

Immigration legislation would unquestionably become more restrictive. And, because social-economic and cultural protectionism is always tempting (especially under the influence of the MAGA conversation), the ECR-ID groups and their national counterparts would not hesitate to halt, interrupt or restrict Europe's investment in new technologies or the path to decarbonisation, replaced by energy poverty strategies.

Using the familiar public discourse of "national interests under attack by the EU", the two parties - if dominant - could push (and blackmail) for decisions that generate exceptions from the rules of the Single Market, hand in hand with national courses of action where direct subsidies to businesses and families could

replace policies focused on investment and re-industrialisation.
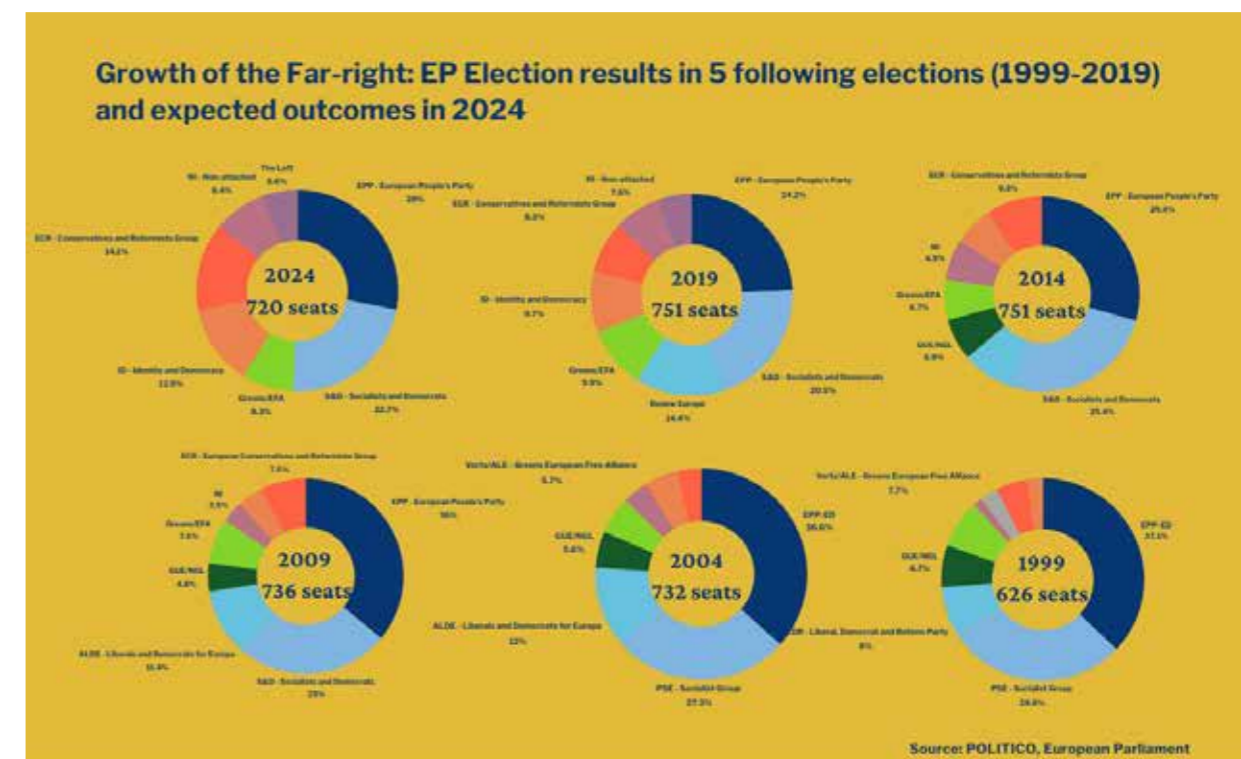
Popularity and social peace are bought this way.

No, Europe's future cannot be Right

A traditional yet simplistic dictum states that Europe is built through crises. This is valid only if there is a will for Europe.

In today's absurd age, Europe is asked to be more and less at the same time a dichotomy reflecting its dual birth. But repeated pressure from the extremes could exhaust and break the system, leaving behind a fragmented European space, consisting of accusatorial nations and the divided, insular and provincial backwaters of thriving empires on foreign continents, too small to fit the history of the 21st century, too unwise to have preserved a project demonstrating their political and ethical maturity.

Who would call such failure a future?

The Right Way

With a mix of historical echoes and novelty, European societies expressed a preference for radical "strong hands" in 2024. From the Atlantic to the Black Sea, in antithesis to the Revolutions of 1848, electorates moved to the Right on the spectrum of politics in a nuanced but decisive manner.

The appointment of a new Prime Minister in France in January illustrated - just like the Dutch elections of 2023 - a turn to the right, placing France in the club of countries where centrism is not sought after.

In Germany - under pressure due to post-Covid and Ukraine-war crises and the exhaustion of their economic model - the government faces an ever-rising AfD, whose success exemplifies the fall of Germany's last historical taboo.

Italy, Hungary and Slovakia, led by the Right, embrace immoderate positions, while Austria's renewed preference for the FPÖ and the rise of populist Chega

in Portugal push Vienna and Lisbon into the same club.

Poland's electoral choice led to a visibly difficult relationship between the executive positions, a scenario to be repeated in Spain, where small, hardline parties can make or break the governmental coalition.

With anti-system trends rising in Romania too, it becomes clear that a higher number of EU member states are open to authoritarian, conservative or nationalist agendas - the best at capturing a social anger often nourished by disinformation campaigns.

Contesting European Integration, the Right Way

This build-up risks the potentially full transformation of Europe's politics and institutional framework.
In such a context, the 2024 EU elections could not only mark the alteration of the political scene by a victory of the ECR-ID groups but also lead to institutional infights and opposition between European levels of decision-making.

The first test will be represented by the appointment of a new President of the EU Commission, where the newly elected Parliament could use the narrative of rejecting "undemocratic interference by member states" and making sure (by institutional blackmail) that, unlike in 2019, a Eurosceptic Spitzenkandidat is appointed at the helm. The same strategy may be applied in selecting commissioners known as Eurosceptic or hostile to further EU integration. The future does not look appealing.

With the EP becoming a herald of national governments and national sovereignty elevated on a pedestal, the new majority could embrace promoting cooperation with non-democratic regimes and label this "a new, pragmatic, efficient way, bilaterally beneficial to every nation" in a "multipolar order where national interests thrive", all subsidised by underground lobbying.

Networks of European officials and MEPs interested in lucrative contacts with foreign states are known to exist; the question is how far they would go in turning the EU decision-making process

Growth of the Far-right: EP Election results in 5 following elections (1999-2019) and expected outcomes in 2024

Source: POLITICO, European Parliament

Too Little Fight Against Corruption, Too Much Blaming Of CSO

Krzysztof Izdebski

The European Union faces many challenges in the years ahead. This includes some that it could have already solved in this parliamentary term but, for various reasons, did not. Despite the corruption scandals, the need for more transparency and the lack of resilience against illegal influences on decision-making, work on systemic solutions is moving too slowly and often in the wrong direction.

This is not to say that nothing has happened regarding these issues. The European Commission and other institutions have done quite a lot to limit the abuses of rule of law and corruption in Member States. However, not enough is being done to fix the issues faced by the EU institutions themselves.

After the corruption scandal in the European Parliament, despite the serious promises that were made, only a shadow of the required regulations were implemented. At the same time, a directive has been proposed that is feared to be more of a threat to Member State organisations defending human rights than a restriction of foreign influence in European politics.

The building of resilience against foreign influence in election campaigns, first announced in Ursula Von Der Leyen's inaugural speech, has not lived up to expectations. For example, it did not lead to a binding regulation increasing the transparency of political advertisements on social media. The societies of European countries will not gain sufficiently strong protection against disinformation and the actual influence of countries hostile to their values during parliamentary elections.

In addition, too limited an effort has been made to increase transparency in the spending of EU budget finances. This includes insufficient systemic support for organisations that could monitor whether corruption and other irregularities are taking place.

(Lack of) Action triggers a reaction

The failure to address these problems may affect the outcome of the June elections and will certainly have an impact on the discussions that will accompany the campaign. This is not helped by successive examples of NGOs being denigrated by the EU while EU officials lack the humility for self-criticism. In January of this year, for example, the Parliament adopted a report on the transparency and accountability of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) funded from the EU budget. According to leading civil society organisations, it is "largely based on assumptions or opinions and is not justified by any substantiated analysis by EU institutions and bodies or verified risks or malpractice."

When ignored, this image of corruption and self-centred officials in the Brussels bubble can become more prominent in public perception than it is in reality.

In France and Germany, for example, we see expressions of dissatisfaction with the EU's steps on climate protection and the associated burdens on certain groups of EU citizens. Although, in my view, these steps by Brussels are justified, its image as a leviathan incapable of effectively policing its spending and lying on its back in the face of the need to fight corruption will not help to overcome resistance to the climate transition. In turn, ruining relations with organisations that traditionally uphold so-called European values deprives the EU of natural and committed allies, who instead lose the motivation to act against populist politicians.
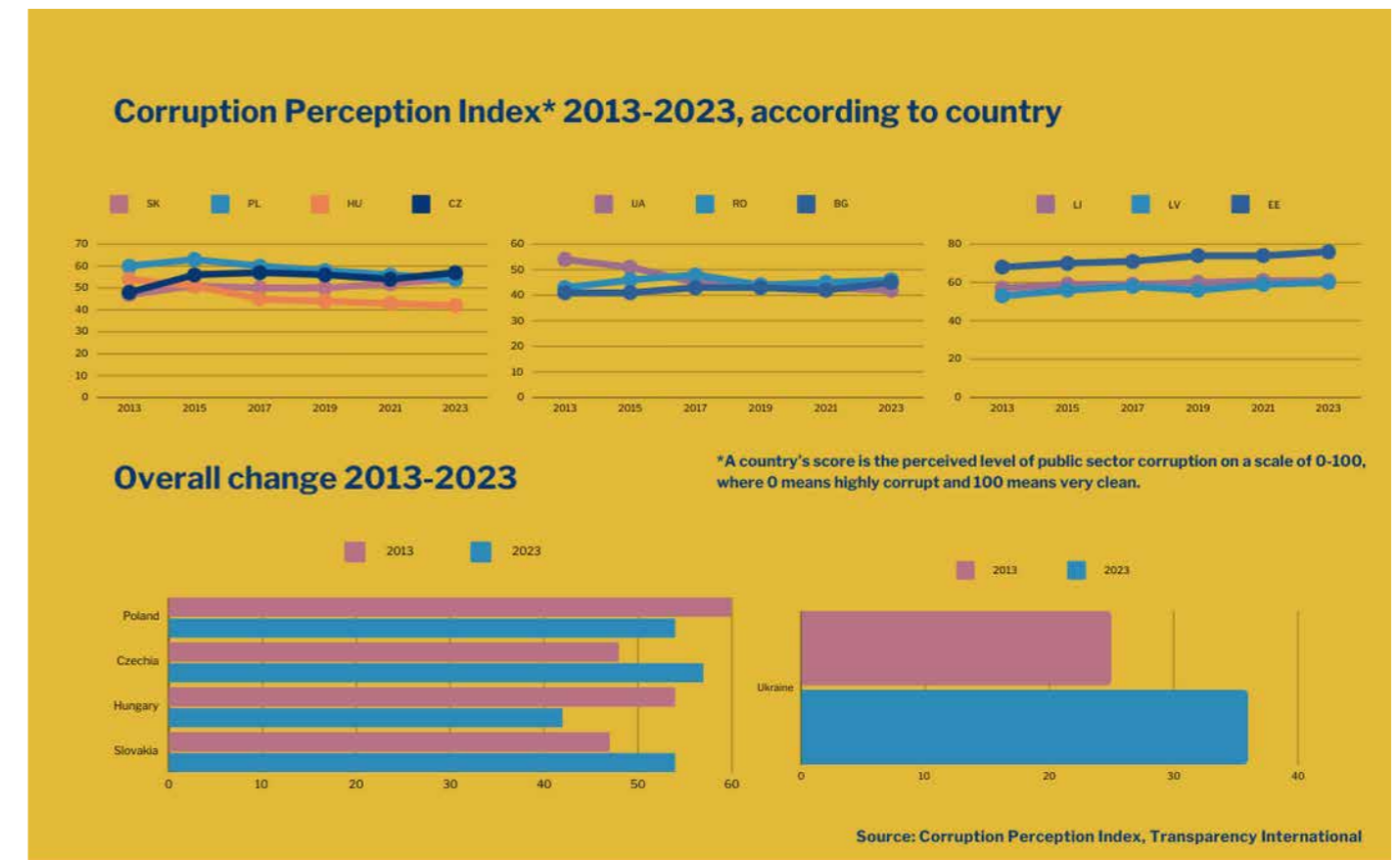
More modesty, more concrete solutions

What we need now are EU institutions that have more humility and courage to fight their own mistakes. Especially as there is much to boast about - on many levels the European project is one of the best achievements in the history of geopolitics and, in the face of shaky global security, a defender of our peace and prosperity.

But we don't always get a bird's eye view of everything. What is important is the here and now and narratives about corruption and the failure to respond to its dangers resonate well within societies. After all, this is also about how the taxes we pay are spent. The EU's lack of sufficient response and action is fuel for populist politicians who can convincingly show voters examples of irregularities committed by Brussels bureaucrats. It is often exaggerated, but there is no need to be indignant about that - this is, after all, the logic of election campaigns.

EU officials simply have to acknowledge this and do everything in these last months to show that the fight against corruption and the promotion of transparency are priorities for the end of this term and the beginning of the next one.

Corruption Perception Index* 2013-2023, according to country

Overall change 2013-2023

*A country's score is the perceived level of public sector corruption on a scale of 0-100, where 0 means highly corrupt and 100 means very clean.

Source: Corruption Perception Index, Transparency International

Charting New Courses: Perspectives and Perils in the EU's Ideological Sea Change
Viera Zuborova

The upcoming European Parliament elections in 2024 are expected to bring about a significant shift in ideologies across the European Union. Populist radical right parties are predicted to gain more votes and seats, while centrist and green parties may experience a decline in electoral support. This change is anticipated to impact the composition of the European Parliament and influence important EU-level policies, particularly in areas like foreign policy and initiatives such as the European Green Deal.

Challenges and expectations from the CEE During the "Navigating the Future of Europe; Perspectives from the EP2024 Strategic Foresight Workshop", participants discussed these projections extensively, providing valuable insights and expressing various concerns regarding the future path of the EU.

One major concern voiced by participants was how the election results could affect fundamental principles such as EU citizenship, democracy and identity. It was suggested that there needs to be more apprehension about candidates who challenge the idea of a united Europe based on shared values, open societies and human rights. Participants also stressed the significance of nurturing a common EU identity rooted in these shared values while acknowledging historical and

religious differences among member states. They emphasised that dialogue, compromise and preserving diversity while fostering solidarity were crucial for maintaining cohesion and resilience within the EU.

This delicate balance between EU standards and local contexts was a central theme of discussion. Participants highlighted the increasing tensions between local communities and EU regulations, leading to mistrust, suspicion and isolation among certain groups within society. It was widely agreed that finding a middle ground between adhering to overarching principles and respecting local nuances is crucial for fostering peaceful coexistence within the European Union. The imposition of standardised rules was cautioned against as it could undermine each jurisdiction's unique interpretations, thus exacerbating existing tensions.

Additionally, there was a strong emphasis on rebuilding trust in EU institutions and promoting inclusivity in decision-making processes. Participants recognised the need to prioritise marginalised groups such as women, ethnic minorities and disabled individuals to ensure equality and representation within the EU. Expanding avenues for public participation through initiatives like investing in journalism practices and supporting platforms like

"artivism" were essential for nurturing empathy and encouraging positive engagement among citizens.

Among professionals in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), there was also a growing sense of alienation and diminishing faith in their countries' democratic path. Concerns surrounding adherence to the rule of law and emerging partnerships, as seen in the illiberal relations between Slovakia and Hungary, can give rise to scepticism and pose a significant threat to the shared narratives essential for European unity, particularly during times of controversy like the Ukrainian conflict.

Addressing these challenges requires a commitment and adaptable approach from all stakeholders involved. Officials should utilise expert insights from events like the strategic foresight workshop to develop targeted interventions to alleviate mounting frustrations. By engaging in dialogues, conducting analyses and pursuing bold courses of action, the EU equips itself with the appropriate tools to confront anticipated difficulties head-on while reassuring concerned observers to monitor developments closely.

To conclude, the outcome of the 2024 European Parliament elections will have significant implications for shaping the future direction of the European

Union. It is crucial to address the concerns and challenges raised by participants during the strategic foresight workshop. This will help us navigate the changing political landscape and ensure the unity and strength of the EU despite shifting ideological currents. By encouraging open discussions, embracing inclusivity and upholding democratic values, the EU can overcome these challenges and emerge as a stronger and more unified entity.

More voice to and from CEE civic actors

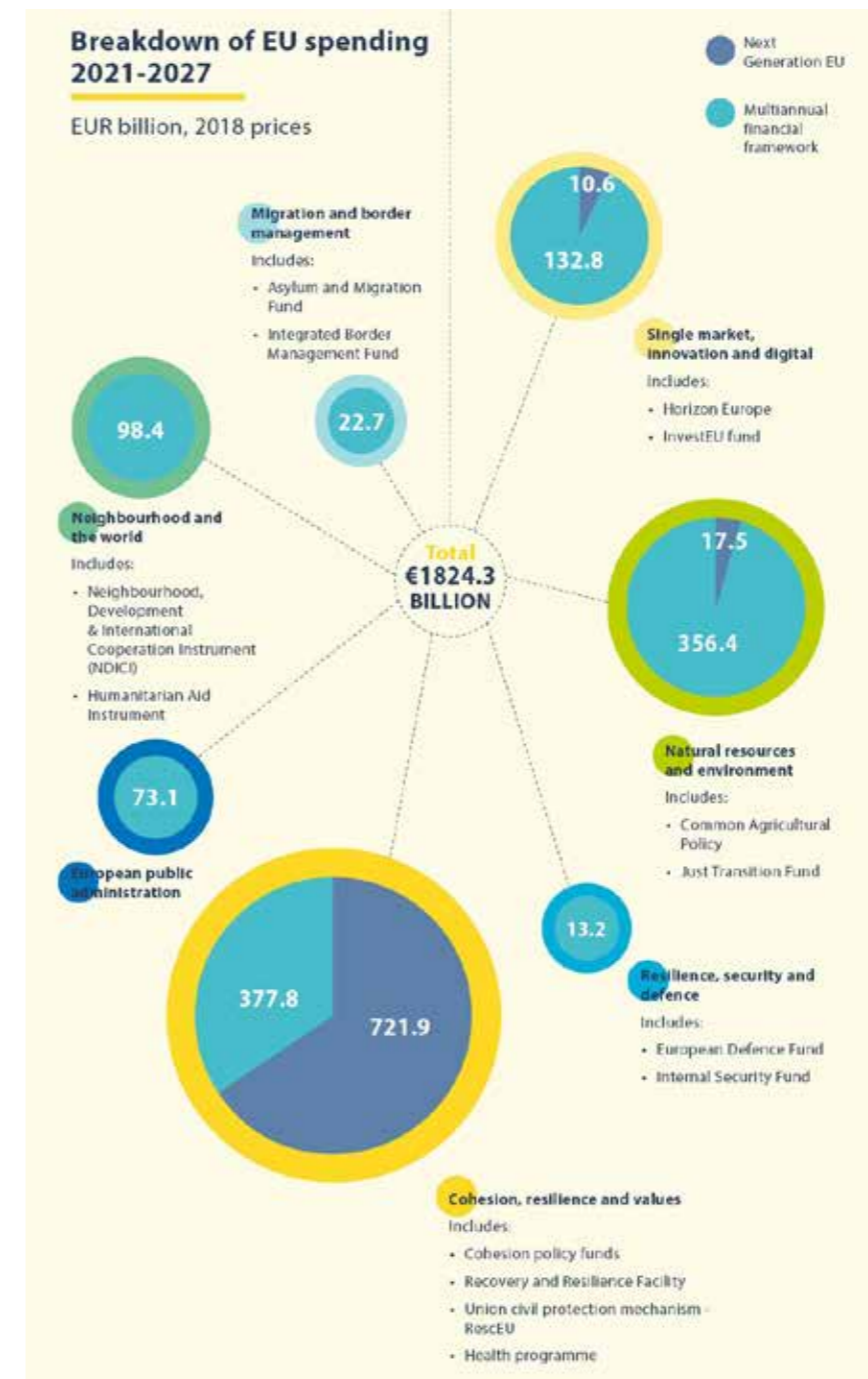Please allow me to write about a concern I raised during the discussion. I saw dissatisfaction among professionals in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), indicating a growing sense of alienation and diminishing faith in their countries' democratic path. Concerns surrounding adherence to the rule of law and emerging partnerships, as seen in the illiberal relations between Slovakia and Hungary, give rise to scepticism and pose a significant threat to the shared narratives essential for European unity, particularly during times of controversy like the Ukrainian conflict.

Addressing these challenges requires a commitment and adaptable approach

from all stakeholders involved. Officials should utilise expert insights from events like the strategic foresight workshop to develop targeted interventions to alleviate mounting frustrations. By engaging in dialogues, conducting analyses and pursuing bold courses of action, the EU equips itself with appropriate tools to confront anticipated difficulties head-on while reassuring concerned observers to monitor developments closely. Restoring trust demands perseverance and ingenuity from all parties invested in this process. I believe relevant stakeholders and authorities should take advantage of consultations offered at gatherings to EP2024 to devise practical solutions that counter disheartening trends and strengthen solidarity. Initiating discussions, conducting studies and implementing resourceful strategies enable the EU to skillfully navigate forthcoming challenges while offering reliable guidance for those seeking reassurance during uncertain times.

Last but not least, words

The upcoming European Parliament elections in 2024 are expected to bring about a noticeable shift in ideologies within the European Union. It is anticipated that populist radical right parties will gain more votes and seats, while centrist and green parties may experience decreased electoral support. This political transformation could shape the composition of the European Parliament and impact policies at the European level. In this paper, we aim to explore how this expected "sharp right turn" might influence foreign policy, including initiatives like the European Green Deal. Through an analysis of recent opinion polls and a statistical model based on past European Parliament elections, our study sheds light on the potential consequences of this ideological realignment for decision-making processes within the European Commission, Council and national governments across the EU. By examining these evolving political dynamics and their implications, our research aims to provide insights into the changing landscape of European politics and its effects on policymaking at both supranational and national levels.

Breakdown of EU spending 2021-2027

EUR billion, 2018 prices

Next Generation EU

Multiannual financial framework

Total €1824.3 BILLION

Migration and border management
Includes:
- Asylum and Migration Fund
- Integrated Border Management Fund

10.6
132.8
22.7

Single market, innovation and digital
Includes:
- Horizon Europe
- InvestEU fund

98.4

Neighbourhood and the world
Includes:
- Neighbourhood, Development & International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI)
- Humanitarian Aid Instrument

17.5
356.4

Natural resources and environment
Includes:
- Common Agricultural Policy
- Just Transition Fund

73.1

European public administration

13.2

Resilience, security and defence
Includes:
- European Defence Fund
- Internal Security Fund

377.8
721.9

Cohesion, resilience and values
Includes:
- Cohesion policy funds
- Recovery and Resilience Facility
- Union civil protection mechanism RescEU
- Health programme

What more democracy looks like
THROUGH THE LENS OF CIVIC COHESION

Kameliya Tomova

Today, on 9 May 2030, we celebrate Europe Day. It is a public holiday all across the continent, and there are festivities everywhere. Walking down the main street of Yablanitsa, a very small and once-segregated town in Bulgaria, I see crowds of people – smiling, dancing, celebrating. The community hall, once an abandoned old building, is now thriving with life and innovation, a space for knowledge, arts and culture for young and adults.

Today, we look back with pride at the European Union's remarkable journey of the past six years. A tough, often arduous journey, but a crucial chapter in history. Leading up to the 2024 EP elections, hate speech, disinformation, and foreign interference scandals had shaken the ground in the face of nationalist, populist and Eurosceptic movements and provoked civic action like never before. Peaking street protests ahead of the elections had united citizens from all across the continent with one vision – to defend our values and freedoms.

In the aftermath of the elections, the EU managed to retain its strategic course, albeit with the realisation that a more resilient structure was imperative to withstand the evolving threats to democracy. And it was clear that this time, it had to be built from the bottom up.

Recognising the strategic significance of civic cohesion as a unifying force, the EU embedded this concept as a fundamental principle into key EU policies, including the Cohesion Policy, the Enlargement Policy, and the Rule of Law mechanism. Civic cohesion, understood as the bond that ties individuals together through shared values, common goals, and active participation in civic life, played a crucial role in reinforcing the democratic foundations of the Union in the last couple of years. As a result, the once prevalent "civic deserts" and "regional development traps," characterised by declining democratic engagement and limited civic opportunities that once fostered disillusionment and polarisation, have now largely dissipated. In their place, a healthy cross-regional system of vibrant civic hubs is now blossoming. This became all possible through the so-called "Massive Action" package released by the EU of implementing comprehensive civic literacy programmes across the board, guided by the principle of a society where citizens actively participate in all democratic processes, empowered by knowledge, skills, and values.

Civic cohesion, once an ambitious concept, is now integral to the EU's Cohesion Policy framework. At the country level, the disparities between urban and rural areas have evolved into a productive web of interconnected communities. Civic infrastructure, ranging from community and youth centres to dynamic public spaces, fuels engagement, while civic literacy bridges understanding across diverse regions. Innovative civic education methods have elevated communal as well as individual well-being as core factors, along with ensuring skills and opportunities for every citizen, regardless of their geographic location, as the prime elements for a well-functioning democracy.

Today, civic cohesion is a popular framework present in most agendas focused on social inclusion, employment, education, and skills development for all. It is a practical framework that citizens actively use to interact with policy makers shaping the outcomes they want to see in society.

Irreversibly, we have finally grasped the fundamental value of an informed citizenry and its importance in strengthening all democratic systems of the EU. Therefore, civic education is strategically incorporated into our day-to-day lives – through our formal and informal education systems, social media, as well as our workplaces and communities – reminding us of our duties and responsibilities in society but also – of the fact that each one of us has agency and ownership, the soft power needed to engage meaningfully in any democratic process.

With our collective agency increasing, we are now on the right path of combating extremist parties and movements, as the institutions, now well-trained and informed, are remaining impervious to polarising influences. We are now more capable of neutralising populist narratives through sustained dialogue backed by a solid network of civic education champions in the face of influential figures, celebrities and TV presenters, fact-checking, facilitating informed dialogues, and making civic participation an attractive concept.

Finally, because it is a new, attractive trend, increased civic action is now capable of putting more pressure on institutions and corporations to become more transparent and accountable. Thanks to that, we now have EU mechanisms handling corruption and malpractice across all member states with great success. As a consequence, our trust in institutions and their civic duties is growing. And so is our mutual trust, and thereafter – our perception of unity and collective identity.

Today, at the end of a tumultuous decade, this jigsaw puzzle of a healthy Union democracy is far from complete. Erosive forces can never be eliminated fully. But with each citizen carrying their own fragment of the puzzle, hope remains that, in time, the right pieces will eventually come together.

Contributors

VISEGRAD / INSIGHT

READ MORE AT:

visegradinsight.eu

FOLLOW US / @VISEGRADINSIGHT