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After the election is before the election

Brussels faces a new political reality as conservative and far-right parties win the EU elections. What are the implications for the Union's future?

The recent elections to the European Parliament (EP) have changed the political landscape in the European Union, shifting it to the right. The European Conservatives (EPP) are the clear winners of these elections, while the Socialists and Democrats (S&D) and the Left have mostly been able to maintain their positions. Its losers are the Greens and Liberals, who have lost over 40 seats in the EP, while the right-wing populist (ECR) and far-right (ID) groups have made significant gains.

What dynamics will this new balance of power develop and what impact will this have on the European Parliament's ability to work? What does the election result mean for the new European Commission and its work programme? And what consequences will these changes have for European integration and for Europe as an actor in a multipolar world?

The tenth direct elections to the EP took place at a time when the global political situation has changed significantly as a result of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. At the same time, never before in the history of the EU have right-wing and far-right parties had such a strong influence in numerous EU Member States. The electorate's vote is making traditional majorities for centrist parties more difficult and will put the Brussels consensus machine to a stress test.

Von der Leyen's political gamble

What happens now? In mid-June at the European Council meeting, the heads of state or government will first deal informally – and then formally at the end of the month – with the election of their own leader as well as the two other top jobs in the EU: Commission President and High Representative for Foreign Affairs. The aim will be to find a package solution that reflects the majorities in the Council and Parliament — and to avoid a repetition of the dysfunctional, almost toxic

relationship between current Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (EPP) and Council President Charles Michel that has weakened the EU over the past five years. Former Portuguese Prime Minister António Costa (S&D) is rumoured to take over as the new Council President, while Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas (Renew) could become the next High Representative.

For the Commission top job, von der Leyen is considered the most promising candidate, even though numerous alternatives have been intensively discussed in Brussels in recent weeks. She can count on the support of numerous centre-right governments in the EU as well as from the social democratic camp. Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, for example, has already publicly announced his support and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz is also likely to have an interest in keeping her in office.

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If von der Leyen is once again nominated by the Council, the decisive hurdle would probably have to be overcome in Strasbourg in mid-July. On 16 July, the Maltese politician Roberta Metsola (EPP) is likely to be re-elected as President of Parliament. Two days later, von der Leyen could be up for re-election. This would allow a list of potential members of the Commission to be drawn up during the parliamentary summer recess.

For her re-election, von der Leyen would need the approval of at least 361 of the 720 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) — a majority that is by no means certain given the strengthening of the right-wing groups. In 2014, Jean-Claude Juncker still achieved this with a 46-vote lead, while von der Leyen did so in 2019 with a nine-vote lead only. At the time, she was supported by right-wing populist parties, who will refuse to vote in favour of her this time. Should von der Leyen flunk in the Council or fail to gain a majority in Parliament, the Council – under the Hungarian Presidency – would have to quickly propose a new person, which would delay the start of the new Commission's work. Such a delay would not only impair the EU's ability to work, but would also cause considerable damage to its reputation.

A clear shift to the right in the EP

The election of the President of Parliament, the Vice-Presidents and the committee chairs will influence the way the European Parliament works as well as its political priorities in the coming years. Parallel to this highly

political process, the political groups in the EP are being reorganised. It is likely that the right-wing and far-right political groups will be reconstituted.

A crucial question will be how to deal with the right-wing populist AfD. Immediately before the election, the German party managed to become a pariah among the far-right parties when Marine Le Pen as well as Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini rejected further cooperation with it and the AfD was excluded from the ID group. However, here, too, the motto applies that what was said before the election no longer necessarily applies after the election. And the expulsion of AfD lead candidate Maximilian Krah from the German delegation shows that the party is doing everything it can to become popular again in the right-wing mudroom. If this manoeuvre does not succeed, the AfD will probably try to establish a third right-wing group in Parliament, which would require at least 23 MEPs from seven Member States. Other right-wing parties that are not yet members of a parliamentary group, such as Viktor Orbán's Hungarian Fidesz party, could be involved.

The option of the right-wing populist and far-right parties forming a new 'super group' is also being discussed. A large right-wing group of this kind would significantly strengthen their negotiating power, lead to polarisation in Parliament and help to orientate the EU agenda more towards national interests and less towards common European solutions. However, this scenario seems unlikely, as many European right-wing parties do not agree on key foreign and security policy issues — particularly with regard to relations with Russia, the war against Ukraine and cooperation with the US and NATO.

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The EPP will play an even more important role in dealing with the European right-wing forces in the future. Instead of courting the Greens, its party and parliamentary group leader Manfred Weber has repeatedly sought cooperation with the ECR and also explored the chances of increased centre-right cooperation with Meloni in recent months. Von der Leyen and Meloni had also cultivated close and almost trusting relations recently, with the former seeking to secure support for her re-election and the latter hoping for greater influence on the European stage, as she had entered the election campaign with the slogan '*Con Giorgia l'Italia cambia l'Europa*' — 'with Giorgia, Italy changes Europe'.

It remains to be seen to what extent Weber and von der Leyen's three conditions for cooperation with the right – pro-European, pro-Ukrainian and pro-rule of law – will ultimately be met when it comes to setting the European course. However, Weber, von der Leyen and co. are openly cosying up to the (extreme) right, and the EPP is in danger of losing the support of the centre-left parties. And the European Social Democrats and Chancellor Scholz have made it very clear that von der Leyen's nomination is not a foregone conclusion should she seek cooperation with the far right.

Overall, the shift to the right in the EP is symptomatic of a broader political shift that reaches deep into the national political landscapes of the EU Member States. It reflects a growing dissatisfaction with 'established politics' and an increasing turn towards populist solutions that promise simple answers to complex problems. Increasing fragmentation complicates decision-making processes in the Parliament and Council and could block important reforms. National interests are becoming more prominent, which could significantly impair the EU's ability to formulate common policies, particularly on cross-border issues such as migration, climate change and economic cooperation.

EU Commission: moving to the right as well

Regardless of who heads the new Commission, many of the new Commissioners will be much further to the right politically, as they are nominated by Member State governments where right-wing forces have become increasingly strong in national elections over the past five years. Socialist Commissioners are only expected to come from Spain, Denmark and Malta, while the EPP and ECR together will provide well over half of the Commissioners. This will naturally have a significant impact on the Commission's new work programme and its future European policy priorities.

A more nationalist Europe will automatically lead to tensions with key partners such as the US and could weaken the EU's role as a global player. Internally, the EU faces the challenge of maintaining cohesion between the Member States. Growing political differences and pressure from populist movements could weaken solidarity within the EU. This would be particularly problematic at a time when joint efforts are needed to tackle global challenges such as climate change or digitalisation.

The EU is now in a phase in which the political balance of power needs to be recalibrated. The coming months will show in which direction it

will develop and how it can react to the new political realities.



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