

EU ELECTIONS 2024: REDRAWING THE CHESSBOARD

by
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The post-election horse-trading for policy concessions and high posts in Brussels is in full swing, reflecting the new balance of power in the EU Parliament for the coming five years. The conservative European People's Party (EPP) has remained the largest grouping in the parliament, while the liberal Renew Europe (RE) and the Greens/EFA lost ground, the Socialist Group (S&D) and the Left stagnated, and the broader far-right made gains. The parliament's new constellations, early EU Council bargains, and domestic spillover effects in the EU's three diplomatic heavyweights – Italy, France, and Germany – illuminate the challenges ahead in forming the next EU Commission.

The Enduring Center Majority

The “[center is holding](#),” was Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (VDL) first comment as the election results were revealed on June 9. The centrist grand coalition of pro-European parties – the EPP, S&D, and RE – which supported her ascent to the Berlaymont in 2019 together gathered a total of 406 seats, as per the preliminary results.¹ That is well beyond the required 361-seat majority, but without comfortable margins. As party officials caution, there could be at least a [10 percent](#) defection rate.

For reasons previously [outlined](#), VDL will likely need to cultivate additional support across the ideological aisle – without concurrently alienating her core supporters. Though she had previously courted support from Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy, VDL's first statements on the enduring center made no mention of pivoting right-

ward, with EPP Party Secretary Thanasis Bakolas [ruling out](#) any institutionalized cooperation. Notably, the [Greens](#) have offered their support in return for a maintained cordon sanitaire against the far-right and unwavering support for the [EU Green New Deal](#), which the EPP would like to revise.

In any case, VDL has come out of the elections strengthened in terms of negotiation leverage. While VDL's own EPP grew only slightly compared to 2019, it has cemented itself as an integral part of any [working majority](#). Combined with S&D's slight decrease, the substantial setbacks for RE and the Greens have cost the center-left precious bargaining power. And while the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and Identity and Democracy (ID) made [considerable gains](#), the overall performance was lower than [anticipated](#), with the extended far-right remaining a divided force.

There was still a broader increase in far-right representation, with a [record number of](#) unaffiliated fringe parties entering Parliament. [Expelled](#) from ID shortly before the elections, Alternative for Germany (AfD) is seeking to unify a new like-minded “[alt-right](#)” grouping, needing only eight additional MEPs representing a total of seven countries to form a new parliamentary group. Though a highly heterogeneous bunch, their [extremist and ultranationalist](#) dispositions will likely complicate efforts by the ECR and ID to seek common ground with the EPP. Still, some of the roughly 100 unaffiliated MEPs may also seek to join pre-existing groups, thereby possibly [altering](#) the relative rankings in Parliament.

Backroom Bargains Begin

Despite early tensions and bureaucratic [infighting](#) in the EU Council, the outlines of an early [consensus](#) materialized remarkably fast after the unambiguous election results, with intimations of a preliminary deal by the June 17 informal leaders dinner. In preliminary discussions, VDL and Roberta Metsola (EPP) were suggested to return for a second term at the helm of the Commission and EU Parliament, respectively, with Portuguese Prime Minister [António Costa](#)

¹ For more detailed overviews of the overall seat distribution by party grouping and member state, see the EU Parliament's [live results tracker](#) and these initial summaries by [Reuters](#), [POLITCO](#), [Euronews](#), and [AI Jazeera](#).

(S&D) as frontrunner for EU Council President, and Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas (Renew) for the High Representative/Vice President (HR/VP).

Agreement has [remained elusive](#) amid last-minute EPP demands for more than two top posts, legal concerns over PM Costa, and frustration among [sidelined](#) right-wing leaders. However, many capitals have signaled a desire to avoid prolonged negotiations, eyeing a potential vote by the June 27-28 EU Council meeting to allow an EU [Parliament confirmation vote](#) by mid-July. Notably, the rotating EU Council Presidency will be [chaired by Hungary](#) from July 1, raising some [question marks](#) over how the nominally neutral stewardship of the Council agenda will be impacted. Prime Minister Victor Orbán has [lambasted](#) the EPP's turn to the center-left, calling on his French and Italian counterparts to swiftly [unify](#) the European right.

Yet, if the Parliament results somewhat clarified the path ahead for the EU's top leadership, the domestic impacts did the opposite, with a parallel strengthening and weakening of different leaders elucidating potential scenarios ahead. For the purposes of governing the EU, three are of particular importance – Italy, France, and Germany.

Intertwined Member State Politics

Seen as the [potential kingmaker](#) before the election, Italy's Giorgia Meloni saw both wins and losses. Meloni's Brothers of Italy (FdI) got 29 percent of the Italian vote, [quadrupling](#) compared to the 2019 EU Parliament elections and growing slightly from the 2022 General Election. Hosting other G7 leaders shortly after the elections, Meloni stood out as the only leader with clearly [reaffirmed domestic support](#), with the next Italian elections scheduled for 2027. This stability lends her a degree of maneuverability and political capital in negotiations that her potential lame-duck counterparts lack.

Conversely, VDL has turned away after Meloni's grand "[alternative majority](#)" failed to materialize. FdI's strong gains came at the cost of cannibalizing government coalition partner Lega (ID), and on a

pan-European level, ECR and ID individually remain smaller than RE. While FdI has pledged to pursue [issue-specific parliamentary majorities](#) with France's National Rally (RN), the impetus for formalized cooperation has partly faltered as Meloni stands less to gain than Marine Le Pen from a majority-deprived [ID-ECR supergroup](#). While [critical](#) of the EPP's center-left turn, Meloni has already benefited from the sway over VDL, including a delayed Italy-centered [rule of law](#) probe and muted criticism of [fascist symbolism](#) in FdI's youth movement.

Yet, the biggest election reverberations undoubtedly came from France, where RN not only came first but more than [doubled the result](#) of President Emmanuel Macron's electoral alliance, 31.4 vs 14.6 percent. Unlike in 2014 when RN came first amid a very low voter turnout, participation surpassed 51 percent, showcasing the strength of the anti-incumbency vote. This prompted Macron to call snap assembly [elections](#), with two rounds set for June 30 and July 7, albeit [ruling out an early resignation](#).

Whether a [calculated risk or mad gamble](#), this push to unify a French anti-far-right vote has massive consequences for EU politics. Firstly, Macron's weakened position both domestically and in the EU Parliament undermines his prospects of [weighing heavily](#) on the Commission nomination process. An anonymous French minister has signaled the main scenario ahead was to back VDL in favor of some policy concessions rather than imposing any outsider candidate. Secondly, even though RN no longer pursues Frexit and the President holds most of the control over foreign policy matters, an [adversarial](#) Prime Minister could greatly impact [budgetary support](#) for key EU projects.

Still, EU and national elections mobilize different parts of the electorate, and the announcement has wrought havoc in the opposition. Though the French [left](#) has reunited into a [New Popular Front](#) after recently [collapsing](#) over Ukraine and Gaza, the right-wing's infighting is verging on parody. RN shut down alliance talks with far-right firebrand Éric Zemmour's [Reconquest](#) within 24 hours, with



Zemmour, in turn, [expelling all but one](#) of his elected MEPs who [criticized him](#) for dividing the right-wing vote. Concurrently, the center-right [Republicans](#) party voted to oust their [leader](#) after he backed an electoral alliance with RN, with opposing factions attacking each other on [official party social media accounts](#). Coupled with Macron's remarkably [low popularity](#), these developments paint a volatile picture ahead of the fateful elections.

Finally, most crucial for the next EU Commission is the support of the German government, which, like its counterpart across the Rhine, was symbolically weakened by the results. The conservative main opposition, the CDU, received nearly as many votes as the entire governing coalition [combined](#), with Chancellor Olaf Scholz's SPD (S&D) trailing AfD as the third-largest party at 14 percent. Though some have called for early elections, Scholz has [ruled it](#) out, yet having a coalition majority in the Bundestag.

While Macron's loss weakened his sway in Brussels, the weakened traffic-light coalition in Berlin has instead seemed more inclined to use its leverage on VDL, who needs its' [nomination](#) as Germany's Commissioner. Though the SPD and Greens initially

outlined only a cordon sanitaire against the far-right as a red line, the liberal FDP has [demanded](#) a slew of concessions: no additional EU borrowing, maintained migration policies, and revising the EU Green New Deal's internal combustion engines phase-out – which is supported by the Greens. Nevertheless, Chancellor Scholz seemed [confident](#) of an agreement, stressing “there is every indication that [VDL] will be able to serve a second term.”

The Short-Term Outlook

While the preliminary election results have offered some initial contours of the big picture of European politics, the early backdoor dealings in Brussels and second-order domestic impacts in the coming weeks will be hugely consequential for the EU's future. Central developments ahead include France's new political landscape after the National Assembly elections, the UK's approach to the EU after next month's general election, and whether VDL can fully reconcile the contradictory demands within the “holding” center.

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