

## The European Union Inches to the Right

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Between June 6 and June 9, elections were held across Europe to determine who would be the 720 members of the European Parliament for the next five years and the balance of political power on the continent. The discourse throughout the election campaign, in which the influence of the October 7 massacre and the subsequent war in the Gaza Strip was evident, focused primarily on political issues (security, immigration, and identity) and on economic issues—at the expense of the climate crisis. While the right increased its strength, the shift in that direction was less than predicted and the center managed to retain its strength. Having said that, the victories of the extreme right on a national level weakened a number of European leaders, especially French President Emmanuel Macron. The European Parliament has only limited powers when it comes to shaping the European Union’s foreign policy, but the balance of power inside parliament—now more convenient for Israel because of the election results—will facilitate Jerusalem’s contacts with the Europeans, even though almost all the parties in parliament, including the extreme right, support the two-state solution.

The European Parliament, which is the only institution in the European Union whose members are elected directly by citizens of member countries, is considered the European Union’s “lower house.” It approves the composition of the European Commission, based on a proposal submitted by the European Council (committee of heads of state or government), and it has the power to censure it. Parliamentary approval is required for any EU law or budget, and it has supervisory and control powers over the other EU institutions. Its influence on EU foreign policy is limited compared to its powers in other areas since most foreign-policy decisions are taken by the national governments. Having said that, its power to approve the composition of the European Commission, agreements with other countries, and budgetary allocations grants it a degree of influence over foreign policy. Through the resolutions it passes and its determined efforts to engage in “parliamentary diplomacy,” the European Parliament has also become a key institution in the European Union’s soft power on the international stage.

In elections for the European Parliament, which took place this year between June 6 and June 9, voters—who usually participate at lower rates in these elections than in the national ones—cast their votes for national lists, which are made up of parties from within their own countries. The elected officials then join multinational political groups, usually based on arrangements that were finalized in advance. This electoral system is the reason national issues affecting each of the countries dominate the

campaigns, rather than issues relating to the European Union and its institutions. Several leaders, including the Italian prime minister, the French president, and the German chancellor, turned these elections into tests of their own domestic support, meaning that the results have ramifications both at the national and European levels.

On the European level, these elections illustrated the drastic changes that the continent has undergone in the past five years. At the heart of the election campaign were issues such as European concerns over the return of war to the continent; arguments over the European identity given the impact of immigration, which have only become more acute as a result of the demonstrations that have taken place in various cities since October 7; and the worsening economic situation of many social groups due to the war in Ukraine. In contrast, the climate crisis remained largely on the sidelines, which was not the case ahead of the 2019 election. Evidence of this can be seen in the failure of the Green Parties, which lost around 20% of their seats in the European Parliament.

The strengthening of the European People's Party (EPP), from the center-right, and its remaining the largest party in the European Parliament continue a trend that we have seen since 2019—the growth of all kinds of right-wing parties in most member states. Despite losses by the social-democratic and liberal parties, the “center” maintained its strength and will continue to influence the policies of the European Parliament over the next five years.

Many experts had predicted a huge victory for the far right in the European Parliament election. While far right parties did indeed increase their representation in parliament, these successes were not replicated across Europe and were instead concentrated in France and Germany. The situation in other countries is more complex, so it would be untrue to say that a far-right wave swept across the entire continent.

In addition, the far right in Europe is undergoing a radical reorganization. Until now, it was divided into two groups: the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and the Identity and Democracy (ID) group. The ECR, led by Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, has adopted a relatively moderate stance and supports both NATO and Ukraine. The ID, under the leadership of France's Marine Le Pen, has been more extreme and included parties with controversial ties to Russia. After the elections, the Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orban, created a new political group centered around his party, taking a radical and rather pro-Russian line. This group attracted former ID members, including Le Pen's party, which meant the end of ID and a new era for the far right in the European Parliament. The Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, previously a member of the ID group but expelled over comments about the SS made by one of its leaders, came in second among German voters and has also been trying to form a third far-right group with unaffiliated members of the European

Parliament. Instead of the union that far-right leaders aspired to before the elections, their parties will now be divided into three groups, weakening their position in Brussels.

In many countries, voters used the election to the European Parliament to express their dissatisfaction with their government. The two leaders who suffered the largest setbacks were Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz, whose Social Democratic Party came in third, and Emmanuel Macron, president of France, where the far right won more than twice as many votes as his party. In response, Macron decided to dissolve the National Assembly and call for a snap election, on June 30 and July 7. The shockwaves in both countries, which are seen as key members of the European Union, could weaken the entire continent. Although the hypothesis of a far-right government in Paris, which raised fears in other European capitals, became irrelevant after the results of the French elections, political uncertainty and instability in France could have far-reaching ramifications for its neighbors and partners. In that sense, the indirect consequences of the elections are perhaps even more significant than the composition of the European Parliament itself.

The first issue that the European Parliament and the European Commission will have to address is the appointment of key positions within the European Union: president and deputy presidents of the European Parliament; chairs of the various parliamentary committees; the president of the European Commission; the president of the European Council; the high representative of the union for foreign affairs and security policy; and commissioners, who are appointed by member countries. After initial discussions that were more complicated than expected, the European Council meeting held on June 27–28 led the European leaders to approve a second term for the EPP candidate, the outgoing President of the Commission Ursula von der Leyen. The council also approved the candidacy of the prime minister of Estonia, the liberal Kaja Kallas (known for her hawkish stance on Russia), for the position of high representative. The Portuguese socialist António Costa was elected president of the European Council, a position that does not require additional approval by the Parliament.

These appointments reflect the desire of the members of the centrist coalition, EPP, Social Democrats and Liberals, to continue working together. This coalition holds a majority in the European Parliament, but due to poor party discipline, which made von der Leyen's initial election difficult in 2019, it is uncertain if she can rely solely on these three groups to be re-elected. One way to broaden the support base for von der Leyen which is being seriously considered by the EPP, is to cooperate with the ECR. However, this plan faces significant challenges. It has drawn criticism from the Social Democrats and the Liberals, who oppose cooperation with the far-right. Additionally, Meloni, who

aims to translate her success both in Italy and at the European level into influence over European appointments, has hardened her stance in recent weeks. The Italian prime minister abstained from voting on von der Leyen's appointment and voted against the other two appointments in the European Council. She expressed her disappointment that these appointments were decided without her agreement and her intention to ensure that her country and the ECR, which has become the third-largest faction in the European Parliament, receive appropriate representation. Therefore, the approval of the European Council appointments by the Parliament is not assured yet.

The new reality in the European Parliament, in which there is a majority for the center on the one hand but a majority for the right on the other, will lead to certain changes—but not to an overhaul of EU policy. The changes will affect the EU environmental policies. The “Green Deal” that was put forward to adapt the European economy to climate change was received angrily by the public. The drop in representation for parties with an ecological agenda in parliament and the new balance of power endanger its continued implementation. It is safe to assume that, when it comes to issues such as immigration, minorities, and the place of Islam in Europe, the composition of the parliament, and the increased strength of the far right across Europe, which puts pressure on various national leaders, will lead to a more aggressive tone from the European Commission and member states and to a more hardline position. Given the limited powers of the European Parliament when it comes to foreign policy and the post-election reality, we should not expect any drastic changes to EU foreign policy.

From an Israeli perspective, it is possible to view the election as a gage of public opinion in Europe, although we must take into account the low voter turnout and the large number of factors that influence the decisions of European voters. The war in Gaza was an important part of the discourse during the election campaign, particularly on the left side of the political map, which tried to drum up support—especially from Muslim voters. The strengthening of the right, including the far right, confirms that anti-Israel forces remain a minority on the continent's political map, even if there has been a move toward more extreme pro-Palestinian positions among some parts of the European public.

In the past, the European Parliament was somewhat a problematic body for Israel, because of its sensitivity to Palestinian rights. Among other moves, in the 2000s, it blocked the planned upgrade of the association agreement between the European Union and Israel. The configuration of the parliament after the election is more beneficial for Israel, as is the end of Josep Borrell's tenure as high representative for foreign affairs, given the Spanish politician's highly critical comments about Israel.

Having said that, Israel would be wrong to overestimate the room for maneuver that has been created as a result of the new reality in Brussels. Almost all the parties represented in parliament, including the most pro-Israel, support the two-state solution and oppose Israeli settlements in Judea and Samaria, which could lead to clashes with the Israeli government. At the same time, the new composition of the European Parliament opens up fresh opportunities. Because of its ability to exert influence on public discourse, global and regional powers have targeted it as part of their lobbying activities. Jerusalem must invest in its relations with Brussels during this complex period, after more than a decade of diplomatic stagnation between Israel and the European Union and must leverage the large number of pro-Israel politicians in its ranks. For the next five years, the European Parliament will be an easier institution for Israel to work with and the Israeli government must act to utilize this opportunity to improve relations with a bloc of countries that is vital for the State of Israel—both politically and economically.

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