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## SECTION II

# EUROPE IN CAMPAIGN: A GEOGRAPHICAL TOUR

- GERMANY: A MORE POLARISED, POLITICISED, BUT ALSO POTENTIALLY MORE NATIONAL-FOCUSED ELECTION CAMPAIGN  
*Max Becker and Nicolai von Ondarza*
- FRANCE: A TRIUMPHANT RADICAL-RIGHT WITH MIXED IMPLICATIONS FOR FRANCE'S EUROPEAN ROLE  
*Georgina Wright*
- TURNING RIGHT: ITALY'S POLITICAL LANDSCAPE AND EU ELECTIONS  
*Matteo Bonomi and Nicoletta Pirozzi*
- SPAIN'S EUROPEAN ELECTION: NATIONAL NO MATTER WHAT?  
*Raquel García Llorente and Héctor Sánchez Margalef*
- POLAND: BETWEEN EUROSCEPTICISM IN REFORMIST GUISE AND TEMPERED EURO-ENTHUSIASM  
*Melchior Szczepanik and Tomasz Zajac*
- BELGIUM: "THE THIRD ELECTION"  
*Benjamin Bodson and Ward Den Dooven*
- ANTICIPATING THE CZECH EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS: AMBIGUOUS EU ATTITUDES, SOVEREIGNTY, SCEPTICISM ON GREEN POLICIES AND REFERENDUM ON THE GOVERNMENT  
*Jan Kovář and Liljana Cvetanoska*
- HUNGARY: DERAILED ELECTION CAMPAIGN BRINGS BACK NATIONAL POLITICS AND OVERSHADOWS ANTI-BRUSSELS MESSAGES  
*Bulcsú Hunyadi*
- AUSTRIA: A SHIFT TO THE RIGHT AS A PRELUDE TO THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN SEPTEMBER  
*Alexandra Bernhard and Stefan Schaller*
- FINLAND: FOCUS ON NEW NATIONAL CANDIDATES  
*Manuel Müller*
- IRELAND: STILL PRO-EU BUT AGRICULTURE AND MIGRATION FEATURE PROMINENTLY IN THE CAMPAIGN  
*Barry Colfer*
- ESTONIA REPEATS THE 2019 ELECTION  
*Merili Arjakas*



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The 2024 European elections in Germany take place not only amid a strained international situation, but also under a shadow of a much-weakened government coalition. The campaign only started in public in early May, with public political discourse currently dominated by the accusations of Chinese and Russian influence surrounding the radical right and anti-EU party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD). A physical attack on a leading Social Democrat candidate in the eastern German state of Saxony is also overshadowing the European election campaign, sparking a debate about political culture and the rise of extremist forces. Furthermore, the tense security situation in Ukraine and the Middle East as well as Germany's current economic challenges are focal points of the discourse, with little specific discussions on EU issues. In consequence, the results are expected to largely mirror national election results, including significant losses for the governing parties, with gains for smaller and new parties. The impact of the scandals surrounding the AfD on the polls remains to be seen, but a loss of electoral support can be expected.

In general, the three parties forming the "traffic light" coalition since 2021 (the social democratic SPD, liberal FDP and Greens) are declared pro-European, as is the largest opposition party, the Christian democratic CDU/CSU. In this vein, the coalition agreement sets a very strong pro-European agenda, including the stated aim of deeper integration and the option of treaty change. However, in practice the coalition has often been characterised by public infighting, including disagreements on selected EU policies, such as parts of the Green Deal legislation, or the degree of military support for Ukraine. In addition, the weakness of the traffic light coalition went together with a rise of the AfD, but also of a new populist party from the left (*Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht*, BSW), which also has a clear Eurosceptic programme. In consequence, these European Parliament (EP) elections will likely see the highest ever share of Eurosceptic MEPs from Germany.

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## A lacklustre start to the campaign

The SPD (affiliated with Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats; S&D,) is running again with their lead candidate and vice president of the EP, Katarina Barley. Given her firm stance on the rule of law, the [party manifesto](#) places particular emphasis on this topic. With the claim "Germany's strongest voices for Europe", the campaign also aims to establish a close link between German national politics and Europe, capitalising on the political weight of Olaf Scholz. Although this is consistent with the European Socialists, their lead candidate Nicolas Schmitt is hardly featured at all in the SPD campaign.

On the side of the Greens (Greens/EFA), their lead candidate Terry Reintke is only really known to EU insiders in Germany, despite her high level of recognition at the European level. At over 100 pages, the [Green Party's manifesto](#) is arguably the longest in the German EU election campaign. A clear focus in the election campaign is not yet apparent, rather major issues such as peace and security in Europe, welfare and climate protection and the protection of democracies in Europe are at the centre of the campaign. Besides the CDU, the campaign around Reintke has been the most consistent in highlighting the European Greens and her role as Europe-wide lead candidate.

The best-known lead candidate among the German public after European Commission (EC) President Von der Leyen is Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann (FDP, affiliated with Renew Europe), currently chair of the Bundestag's defence committee. She has gained a high national profile through her vocal support for Ukraine and her fierce clashes with Chancellor Olaf Scholz. The FDP's campaign is placing full emphasis on Strack-Zimmermann as a tough-talking politician. Its [manifesto](#), however, displays a rather traditional liberal tone. Among the most important topics are cutting red tape and strengthening the subsidiarity principle, as well as a focus on a more market-oriented EU with more free trade and less regulation. Despite the fact that Strack-Zimmermann is one of the lead candidates of the European liberal camp, there is no special emphasis or visibility of that, exemplified by the fact that her participation in the Maastricht debate was not prominently advertised.

The conservative CDU (affiliated with European People's Party; EPP), with its lead candidate Ursula von der Leyen, is unwilling to abandon its national role as a critic of the traffic light coalition in the EU election campaign. It is therefore to be expected that initiatives such as postponing the ban on combustion engines will be points of contention in the CDU's election campaign, aiming at mobilising the German electorate. However, current commission president Von der Leyen has not been featured prominently in the CDU campaign and her role as the EPP's European lead candidate has not been over-emphasised so far, taking a back seat to her role as commission president and her role as national lead candidate. The [joint election manifesto of CDU and CSU](#), is heavily securitised and puts special emphasis on the overarching call for a stronger EU foreign and security policy and on internal security. The Green Deal, however, the flagship initiative of Von der Leyen's term as EC president, is referenced only two times in the manifesto. Bavaria's sister party, the CSU, unsurprisingly opted for the current leader of the

EPP group in the EP, Manfred Weber, and is campaigning for the support of Bavarians with the slogan “For a strong Bavaria in Europe”.

The campaign of the radical right AfD (so far affiliated with Identity and Democracy; ID) was first severely damaged by revelations surrounding suspected Russian influence and ultimately following the arrest of a close employee of lead candidate Maximilian Krah, accused of spying for China. As a result, both the lead candidate Krah and second-placed candidate Petr Bystron, whose offices and homes were recently raided by German police after accusation of taking Russian bribery, will not play a prominent role in the final stretches of the election campaign. Beyond this, the AfD is campaigning for an end to the EU in its current form and wants to create “a new home for a community of sovereign states” but stops short of openly campaigning for “Dexit”. The [manifesto](#), meanwhile, calls for a restoration of energy relations with Russia as well as an end to economic sanctions and severely restricting the influx of migrants. The European anchoring of the party is in doubt, as well, after controversial statements by Krah on the Nazi past provided the final argument for Marine Le Pen to [publicly denounce future cooperation](#) with the AfD in the next EP, where it thus will likely have to sit non-aligned.

Taking into account the media and social media presence of the top candidates, this is consistent with the ranking of the level of public awareness outlined above. In the German-language news publications published between January and April 2024, Ursula von der Leyen was the most frequently mentioned candidate, accounting for 47% of the news volume. Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann was a close second, with 38% of the mentions, presumably due to her prominent role in the German security policy debate. In contrast, Barley, Weber and Krah were mentioned approximately equally often (around 5% each), while Terry Reintke was significantly underrepresented during this period. A similar pattern emerges when considering social media presence, with Von der Leyen likely having the highest reach on X and Instagram, closely followed by Strack-Zimmermann. After a long period in which Germany’s political landscape on TikTok was almost exclusively dominated by the AfD, an increasing number of parties and politicians from across the democratic spectrum have been trying to establish a TikTok presence and translate their European election campaigns onto the platform using the slogan “reclaim TikTok”.

In addition to the established parties, the EP elections are also viewed as a chance to gain Germany-wide visibility for a number of smaller and/or new parties. Altogether, 35 parties have been registered to compete in the 2024 German EP elections. Part of the reason why the EP elections are so attractive for small parties in Germany is that there is no threshold, unlike in national elections, and the comparatively high number of 96 MEPs means that a party can win a seat with less than 1% of the vote. In 2024, the pan-European Volt Party, the Pirate Party, as well as the *Freie Wähler* (Renew) and the new BSW Party hope to win seats. Also of note is the *Demokratische Allianz für Vielfalt und Aufbruch* (Democratic Alliance for Diversity and Renewal; DAVA), a party funded by German nationals predominantly of Turkish origin, who state their aim is to fight for better integration of migrants. The party is accused of close connections to Erdogan’s AKP and aiming to get a voice for the Turkish president into the EP. Its electoral chances are untested, as the EP elections are its first ever elections in Germany.

The final result of the AfD will send an important political signal, as the party has become even more radicalised than most of its counterparts within the ID group. Given the recent tensions between Le Pen and the AfD, it could even contribute to a split or reordering of the radical right in the EP.

## An election to punish the national government

Looking ahead to election day, the polls promise a difficult day for the coalition parties. In terms of expected outcome, the few polls that were conducted specifically for the EP elections predict a result very close to regular nationwide polls for the next Bundestag elections.

Polls forecast the CDU/CSU to be the largest party (close to 30%), which would make it one of, if not the largest, national delegations in the EP again, and a leading force in the EPP. Second place is more closely contested, with the AfD currently polling second, just above the SPD, on around 16%. This would be a significant improvement for the AfD (which scored 11% in 2019), although some polls in 2023 placed it at well over 20% and competing for first place. The SPD, meanwhile, polled very badly in 2019 already (with 15.8%) and could therefore even slightly improve its results. The Greens stand to suffer the heaviest losses, after their record result of 20.5% in 2019 and are currently polling at around 15%, whereas the FDP could fall below the symbolically important 5% threshold. Finally, both the BSW and the FW are expected to establish a nationwide foothold with close to 6%, respectively around 3.5%.

Overall, the trend in Germany points towards losses for the mainstream, pro-European parties. The parties of the former “grand coalition”, despite the CDU/CSU lead, would be well below 50% combined, whereas just ten years ago in 2014 they scored 62.6% together. Adding the Greens and the FDP, the traditional mainstream parties in Germany jointly obtained 76.7% of the votes in 2014 and are now polling together at roughly 60%. In contrast, the share of populist, Eurosceptic or anti-EU parties (in particular AfD and BSW) could rise well above 20% for the first time.

## A warning shot, but not a breakdown moment

The expected results also colour the expectations for the political effects of the European elections, first and foremost for national politics. Often viewed together with the upcoming regional elections in Saxony, Thuringia and Brandenburg in the autumn of 2024 (three Eastern German *Länder* where the AfD polls particularly high) the expectations are one of a warning shot to the governing parties. If the final results prove close to the polls, the CDU/CSU would underline its ambition to return to leading the government after the next German elections, while the frictions within the present government are likely to increase, with particular pressure on the FDP. An early breakdown of the coalition, however, remains unlikely.

In terms of EU policy, the repercussions are likely to be limited. The CDU/CSU is anticipated to retain its leading position within the EPP, and the German government overall is likely to support Ursula von der Leyen as commission president if the EPP becomes the largest party again. If not, the German Greens have obtained the right to propose the next German EU commissioner. The Greens, due to their prominent position within the European Greens/EFA group, would be weakened, whereas the SPD can expect to retain its position as a strong, but not dominant force within the currently Spanish-led S&D group.

The final result of the AfD will also send an important political signal, as the party has become even more radicalised up to the point of being thrown out of the ID group by Le Pen, including allusions to an EU exit in its party manifesto. If the party scores better than the polls predict, despite the spying scandals, it could embolden its more radical sections, whereas a weaker than expected showing would affirm the strategy of radical right parties working towards a more moderate image, like Le Pen's *Rassemblement National*. Given the announcement of the RN, the Italian Lega and the Czech SPD (all ID) to no longer work with the AfD, it could even contribute to a reordering of the radical right in the EP.

As the 2024 European elections approach, the German debate is currently characterised by heightened polarisation and a strong national focus. At the same time, the politicisation of the EU election campaign has increased compared to 2019, while the challenges of a growing radical right spectrum and declining support for mainstream pro-EU parties remain.

