

In a pivotal electoral year, what do women want?



Introduction

2024 is an important year for democracy. More than half of the world's population will head to the polls with elections set to take place in over 50 countries, as well as in the European Union. While any election at any time holds significance, the present era of permacrisis raises the stakes for this mammoth year of voting.

Whether the outcome of these elections will be generally positive or negative remains to be seen. However, the ramifications will differ based on factors such as gender, age, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and occupation. As such, to mark International Women's Day and within the context of the upcoming national, European, and global elections, we sought to gather the perspectives of many great women – in the EPC as well as women we work with – on elections.

Our call received over 50 contributions authored by women from different backgrounds and age groups, as well as various EU member states and the Balkan countries, Montenegro, and the Republic of Moldova.

In doing so, we have explored questions such as why does voting matter? Why should anyone care about the European elections? What should the priorities be for the EU institutions considering the polls? How can the gender and diversity agenda be advanced? Can female leadership at the helm of the Commission and Parliament make a difference? What potential implications do these elections hold for the future of democracy?

The strong and powerful entries to this compendium we received remind us of the pivotal importance of more diverse and more female leaders in key decision-making roles. This year's edition of International Women's Day not only calls for celebration but also for action, considering what's at stake in elections throughout the world.



Aleksandra Tomanic
Executive Director, European Fund for the Balkans

With around half of the global population being asked to cast their vote during 2024, this year is a super election year. Unfortunately, the most commonly shared sensation regarding the outcome is fear.

Not all of these electoral processes will be free and fair; a prerequisite for democratic elections. We have become too used to terms like “illiberal democracy” and “hybrid regime” where fake elections allow for the pretence that “the people have spoken”. But citizens can only be objective voters if they have all relevant information, have free media and can vote without fear of repercussion.

This is the case in most EU countries but yet, even here, fear of the outcome of these elections and their implications for the European project is prevalent. General fear seems to be a common denominator. While some fears might be broadly categorised as objective, like the pandemic, wars, climate change and economic hardship, there is an even longer list of irrational fears, nurtured by enemies of democracy and equality.

Misinformation and disinformation serve to destroy trust and to spread fear. In many societies, gender sensitive language is often a bigger source of outrage than gender-based violence.

The existence of such an overarching fear needs to be taken seriously by mainstream politicians. For now, it is used and, above all, misused only by the populist right.

No emotion can be tackled with facts only. Even knowledge is often not enough.

“He is not good for you.” “I know, but...” This can be upgraded to any other life situation.

Fear is a poor adviser. It remains to hope for this awareness of voters across the EU, being voters enjoying one of the biggest democratic freedoms worldwide. In some elections, voting for the smaller evil is enough, even if the smaller evil has disappointed previously. Too much is at stake.



Alice Stollmeyer
Founder and Executive Director, Defend Democracy

In her bid for a second mandate as President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen vows to ‘defend democracy from those who seek to destroy it’. As the founder of Defend Democracy, this is music to my ears. Assuming Von der Leyen is not making an empty election promise, I have some concrete suggestions for how her next Commission can start defending democracy.

First of all, the European Commission needs a dedicated Vice President for Democracy, supported by a Directorate-General (DG) for Democracy. Currently, democracy is all over the place: DG Justice and Consumers, DG CONNECT, the European External Action Service. For more focus, more coordination and to overcome silo-thinking, we need a dedicated Vice President and DG to connect the dots between foreign, domestic and technological threats to democracy.

Secondly, we urgently need to create an independent EU Democracy Fund. If the EU wants to protect its founding values while increasing its strategic autonomy,

European civil society cannot depend on a decreasing number of democratic governments and the whims of a few American billionaire donors. A modest percentage of the European Investment Bank’s interest revenues could fill this EU Democracy Fund.

Third, the time to invest in democracy is now. If there is one lesson that EU leaders should learn from Ukraine, it is that democracy is closely linked to security. Supporting democracy abroad and defending it at home is security policy. Investing in stronger democracy, societal resilience and civil preparedness for Russia’s hybrid - or even conventional - warfare is not charity; it is investing in our security.

Given geopolitical developments and the rise of an authoritarian far right, the upcoming European elections are more important than ever. Not only for democracy, but also for our security. Von der Leyen should keep her promise. And from 6-9 June, please use your vote!



Alida Vracic
Director, Think Tank Popolari

The EU stands in the midst of global conflicts, the rise of far right movements and uncertainties surrounding European security, transatlantic collaborations (including commitments towards NATO) and the forthcoming US elections. The need for individuals to take action, voice their opinions, and offer solutions is more pressing than ever. Courageous individuals who embody the right values and understand the fragility of peace are essential.

As the critical elections draw near, voting emerges as a powerful tool. EU institutions possess the means to steer laws and policies, strategically allocating funds to address pressing issues. Working actively to halt conflicts and prioritising the confrontation of xenophobia and misogyny should be at the forefront. Solid economic recovery plans, particularly focusing on women, should take centre stage, promoting inclusivity and bridging gaps within the EU.

Amidst these challenges, fresh, innovative ideas that encourage proactive approaches are imperative. The youth should seize this opportunity to assert their

voices and perspectives, no longer waiting for older generations to hand over their rights.

A crucial aspect of this agenda is advancing the cause of gender and diversity. We must tackle the gender pay gap. The EU should lead this change, setting an example of swift progress and demonstrating a commitment to breaking free from outdated norms and fostering equality for all. This entails translating commitments into action – allocating funds strategically, improving education, healthcare and combatting gender-based violence. Systemic barriers must be dismantled, ensuring fair representation and fostering environments where everyone can thrive.

Notably, increasing the representation of women in leadership positions is paramount. The EU institutions, including the Parliament, have the tools to direct laws and policies and strategically allocate funds. Used wisely, these actions can underscore a commitment to shaping a more inclusive, diverse and democratic future for the European Union.



Alison Hunter
Senior Adviser, European Policy Centre

International Women's Day celebrates the role of all women, and reminds us – in this year of elections across the world – of the gap between reality and aspiration in putting gender and diversity at the forefront of a better future. Reducing the opportunity gap that continues to leave behind many women requires a stronger female perspective across the whole political process. For the EU and the upcoming European Parliament elections, this starts now, when politicians and their groups are setting out their priorities for the EU's future.

Gender and diversity barriers are baked-in [systemically](#) to our public policy and political frameworks. In today's complex crises era, there is a real risk that gender issues are relegated to second or third order priorities; all at a time when different groups of women are affected in complex and distinct ways by today's existential challenges (e.g. uncertain geopolitical environment, a protracted cost-of-living crisis, health pandemic 'scarring' and the ongoing fallout of the climate crisis).

Sure, these challenges affect everyone but we continue to under-invest in their differentiated impacts, not least across gender lines. The disproportionate burden carried by women during the worst stages of the health pandemic shows us how far we still have to go.

Positively, strides have been made in increasing female political representation in the European Parliament and the European Commission. But many would argue that this has yet to translate into policy design and scrutiny that is sufficiently sensitive to gender-related policy impacts. All political groups need to shift from rhetoric to informed and compelling policy action to redress this systemic oversight. Indeed, this could help to balance the male/female vote share in the upcoming election, better engaging women in the EU project.

To quote the UK suffragette motto: 'deeds not words'.



Ardita Abazi Imeri
Programme Coordinator, European Policy Institute

In the dynamic context of 2024, the international community anticipates an unprecedented wave of elections across the world, including powerhouse democracies and the European Union. This electoral surge unfolds against a backdrop of escalating authoritarianism, tensions in the Western Balkans, wars in Ukraine and the Middle East and a global erosion of democratic norms.

Amidst this electoral fervor, the Russian aggression in Ukraine persists and the world is witnessing an ongoing humanitarian crisis in Gaza, where the violation of international human rights conventions by Israeli attacks has shocked the global conscience. This serves as a stark reminder of the urgent need for leaders who uphold human rights and prioritise diplomatic solutions to conflicts.

In the Western Balkans, where the echoes of past conflicts still resonate, the outcomes of these elections could either pave the way for stability and democratic

progress or plunge the region into further turmoil. Hope rests on the victory of pro-democratic forces and strong supporters of enlargement policy to lock in progress and steer these nations towards peace and prosperity.

Internal divisions in the European Union have led to a rise of anti-European, populist and far right parties which may shift European policy from 2024 onwards. Such a shift can be devastating for securing long-term stability on the continent, but also, most importantly, for democracy. Therefore, the need for strong leadership and unwavering commitment to democratic principles has never been more pressing. Citizens must consider the threats and opportunities of their choices. The leaders they elect will not only shape domestic policies but also affect the geopolitical scene and the response to humanitarian crises such as in Gaza and Russian aggression in Ukraine. Mainstream parties in Europe must also act and make clear that they can protect the democratic values upon which the EU is founded.



Dr Audrey-Flore Ngomsik
CEO, Trianon Scientific Communication and President, Brussels Binder

Every vote matters? Yeah, sure, we've learned that at school. Through our votes, we trust individuals to represent us, to shape the course of our collective future, for better or worse. It not only ensures that our ideals are reflected, but also holds those in positions of authority accountable for their actions.

The more people vote, the more complete will be the political picture emerging from elections. The more people vote, the more the minority will feel obliged to accept their defeat.

So much for the theory. At present, however, we face a real conundrum. Democracies in Europe are under threat by the success of far right parties. Should the democratic, progressive forces lose, they would be expected to accept their defeat. However, the other side wants to change the game in such a way that they'd never have to worry about winning elections again.

There is a lot of talk about making democracies waterproof. A nice thought, however, but one that is, of course, immediately attacked as undemocratic by those against whom such measures would be directed.

The best defence against undemocratic parties is not just a high turnout of voters but active participation in the political process. Scrutinising our elected representatives and holding them to account on every level, from local mayors in suburbs or villages to top-tier politicians. A tiresome job, indeed, and one not everyone is cut out for.

This is where we come full circle. Not everyone may be suited to examining the performance (or lack thereof) of our politicians. However, everyone can cast their vote. It is the first step, and this is why every vote matters.



Berta López Domènech
Junior Policy Analyst, European Policy Centre

Just a few days ago, the Serbian ruling party announced a rerun the Belgrade local elections after weeks of mass protests against the evidence of electoral fraud, and amid the relative international pressure coming from Brussels and other EU capitals.

The [OSCE](#) concluded that the elections had taken place in unjust conditions and reported episodes of vote buying. Local and international observation missions such as [CRTA](#) and the [Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe \(PACE\)](#) found that the irregularities were serious to the extent of allegedly having altered the final result in the Belgrade City Assembly. Against this background, tens of thousands gathered in the Serbian capital the annulment of the results and calling for new elections.

Domestic protests were combined with some level of international pressure. The EU, Germany, and

the US, as well as some European political groups and MEPs, voiced their concerns regarding fraud allegations immediately after the election. Last month, the [European Parliament](#) called for an independent international investigation into the fraud allegations.

While behind the decision, to call for new elections, lies political calculation by the ruling party, it still serves to demonstrate the importance of political participation in all its forms – from putting a vote into a ballot box to demonstrating on the streets.

And this is a valuable lesson, especially at a time when political discontent and populism are on the rise, and with forecasts projecting a considerable growth of far right and even authoritarian forces across Europe. Hopefully, all Europeans with the right to vote in the upcoming European Parliament elections will keep that in mind when we go to the polls in June.



Brooke Moore
Policy Analyst, European Policy Centre

Elections are profoundly meaningful for many reasons. They are an exercise of democratic ability, an opportunity to direct change and the foundation of our democratic system within the EU. They are also, unfortunately, not a given and not to be taken for granted.

As I write this piece, women's rights are not only being challenged, but actively stripped throughout the world. Within this context, the act of voting transforms into a powerful declaration of our commitment to justice and equality – a driver of change, but also defiance and defence against the forces that challenge the very democracy elections symbolise.

Europe is not immune to these challenges. [Italy](#), [Poland](#), [Hungary](#) and [France](#) are just four examples of EU countries witnessing recent protests over women's issues like femicide and choice. Equal pay, representation, protection from violence, freedom from harassment and discrimination, and the right to gender expression represent fundamental rights that, though inalienable, remain inaccessible for many people. As we edge closer to the EU elections this June, polling

suggests an unsettling resurgence of far-right populism across Europe. This resurgence threatens to place us in a relentless, Sisyphean struggle, where efforts to advance fundamental rights for everyone, not just women, are met with a mounting tide of opposition.

Post-elections, the EU requires a radical dismantling of the patriarchal culture that drives its political institutions. Only [40.6%](#) of MEPs elected in 2019 were women. For institutions tasked with drafting equality and inclusion policies, embodying these principles is the bare minimum. Institutions that reflect the demographics they serve ensures policies address the diverse needs, ways of knowing and experiences of their beneficiaries. Policy outputs must also evolve from tokenistic gestures and acknowledge the multidimensional concepts of gender, sexuality and intersectionality.

Though this change within my lifetime may seem remote, elections remain a beacon of hope for me, whether as a stepping stone of progress or resistance to forgo the future we all deserve.



Burçak Inel

Director of Financing Sustainable Growth, European Banking Federation

As European citizens, we are approaching that special moment occurring every five years when we get to vote for European elections. On the occasion of International Women's Day 2024, let's recognise our power – and commit to using it.

We influence EU policies indirectly every time we exercise our political rights in our countries; but now is our chance to directly elect the members of the European Parliament, which elects the President of the European Commission and co-legislates on key aspects of our physical environment, economies and societies.

Incoming EU politicians will face immense challenges, including, among others: the war in Ukraine; security threats from state and non-state actors; climate change; industrial policy; international trade; and the rise of populism and racism. These challenges require real and durable solutions that garner broad support – which can only come from strong voter turnout in support of democratic parties.

An EU that can prosper in the face of these challenges can have international influence – and promote its values globally.

To get there, more than ever, we need political leadership – in all EU institutions – that is creative, avoids groupthink and considers different points of view. Every policy challenge – from ramping up ammunition production to boosting competitiveness – stands to benefit from a more inclusive balance of concerns and interests. We need to tap into the talent and insights of everyone and give women and men an equal chance to move the EU forward. That is why we need more women elected to the European Parliament and appointed to decision-making roles. Despite great strides, our Parliament is still short of gender equality. We can change that – but only if voters who believe in the power of equality go to the polls and make their voices heard.



Camille Dobler

Head of Research, Missions Publiques

Today, March 8th, 2024, for the first time ever, the right to abortion formally becomes a constitutional right in France. It took more than two years of perseverance, negotiation and debates to reach this historic moment, in a country where the right to abortion has been in place for 50 years. So, why bother?

In recent years, this right has been weakened in several modern democracies. And while we often look at the US, the situation in Europe also deserves attention. Three years ago, in Poland, thousands of women demonstrated after a near-total ban on abortion. In Malta, the situation is just as dreadful. We all know that the law is one thing; reality is another. In Italy, it is becoming harder to find a health worker who does not deny care based on their personal beliefs or convenience. Beyond the powerful symbol represented by the constitutionalisation of abortion in France, the focus must now shift to the effectiveness of this “guaranteed freedom.”

I do not believe in coincidence. Simone Veil was the first female President of the European Parliament. She also legalised the right to abortion in France in 1975. For the first time, a Maltese holds the highest seat in the Parliament and, should we soon have an all-female leadership of the European Union, women will be expecting more than symbols. To secure women's rights, we must also get to work: in 2018, Irish voters proved that casting a vote on election day matters. The decision to call a referendum on this issue was based on recommendations made by a panel of 99 ordinary people, who deliberated in a Citizens' Assembly.

I do not believe in coincidence. To advance gender equality and diversity in the EU beyond symbols, we need more diversity in our representative institutions and more inclusive and deliberative democracies. 2024 is set to be the biggest electoral year in history. So, like Paola Cortellesi in her brilliant ‘C'è ancora domani’, let's hold electoral ballots like love letters.



Catherine Fieschi

Fellow, European University Institute and Author of *Populocracy*

When I think about the upcoming European or US elections, mainly, I worry. I worry first about the terrible and recurring paradox of democratic elections undermining democracy. Populist parties, both in Europe and the US, promising the worst possible kind of democracy – oppressive, majoritarian, unfit for diverse societies, unfair to the most vulnerable, and appealing mainly to the cynical. Where is the arc of progress?

I worry next about the polarisation and lack of consensus that could plague European institutions if, as anticipated, populist and far right parties increase their share of seats. How this would reinforce such dynamics at the national level, precisely at a time when unity, resolve and speed should be our only focus? I worry next about the unbearable – and also timeless – irony of women undermining other women. Of female leaders – in power, or in opposition – chipping away at the status and rights of women.

Finally, I worry about the toll of such populist dynamics over time; how they open the door to the capture and

weakening of institutions. And to authoritarianism. Then I catch a glimpse of that elusive arc of progress: distant, flickering like a faulty neon sign, but still there. These elections, here and in the US, fraught as they are, could galvanise progressives.

Could such challenges force the emergence of better versions of democracy? Of institutions and practices suited to new generations of voters and their expectations? More deliberative, more responsive and more rewarding?

Could attacks on women’s rights deliver even fiercer, renewed mobilisation by women and their allies, of the kind we saw in Poland and elsewhere?

Could Europe set an example of how to deal with polarisation? Revive and uphold the lost art of alliance building, of negotiation and dialogue – the true premises of advanced democracy? As other elections take place – Russia, Iran – I am still worried, but also grateful and determined.



Chiara Rosselli

Co-Founder and Executive Director, APROPOS Group

As we approach a year marked by pivotal elections, a recurring theme emerges from my decade-long career in think tanks: the anticipation of yet another year set to redefine Europe and the global order. Against this backdrop, there is one thought that, amidst the noise, stands out to me.

I have been working with politicians across parties and the continent for ten years, and I hear an ever-stronger realisation that we’ve entered an era where even the most seasoned politicians no longer confidently hold the answers that our societies need. While this realisation may seem trite, its resonance is deafening.

This super-election year provides a unique opportunity to harness post-election momentum and cultivate the kind of reflection spaces our political operators need to wrestle with the unanswerable questions of our time. For example, “how can we drive forward progress while delivering the security that our citizens so powerfully demand?”

Recently, I watched a documentary provocatively titled, “Are we lacking utopias?” It echoed the sentiments I’ve gleaned from politicians across the continent. What emerges is a call for more profound reflection: we need spaces to rethink, not just tweak or crisis-manage; we need spaces to build new, aspirational narratives for our society, not just keep playing defence.

My hope is that European institutions, think tanks and political conveners will be bold in leading conversations that address the difficult political questions of our time, without the expectation of immediate solutions being found. And, of the utmost importance, I hope these existential conversations will be had beyond the confines of the EU bubble and engage national parliaments and political communities across the continent.

We must carve out the intellectual and political spaces essential for genuine dialogue and visionary thinking—and we must all take responsibility to be a part of this collective and explorative endeavour: what do we want the politics and the society of tomorrow to look like?



Corina Stratulat

Associate Director and Head of the European Politics and Institutions Programme, European Policy Centre

Voting is a hard-earned right and a civic responsibility – especially for women. But, above all, as a woman, I like to look at voting as an extraordinary opportunity:

... an opportunity to wholeheartedly thank all the women who came before me and courageously refused to accept not being able to vote, all those fierce ladies who struggled – and managed! – to give us voice, choice, education, careers and freedom to seek and have as much and whatever we want. What better way to recognise their bravery? What better way to pay tribute to their effort? What better way to avoid squandering their sacrifice if not by using the voting privilege they secured for us?

... an opportunity to honour not just my inspiring female predecessors but also my own values, abilities and strengths. If women fought for the right to vote, it is because they indisputably deserve it: they hold distinct preferences, ideas and aspirations; are perfectly capable

of deciding for themselves; and excel at emotional intelligence when taking action. Why should we ever allow others – like men – to choose for ourselves? Why should we give away our power when past ‘she-heroes’ pushed so hard to empower us? It’s satisfying to express with pride through voting my sense of self-worth, competence and relevance in society as a woman.

... an opportunity to continue drawing the path and consolidating the legacy of women’s empowerment for the next generations. Democracy is not a spectator sport: rights have to be practiced to remain meaningful. If women want still-standing barriers to fall, they have to keep getting involved. Too much is at stake in the complex socio-economic and political reality of our contemporary world to be able to defend inaction. Women tomorrow need the example of women today. The case of women voting for a better and more equitable future has arguably never been more compelling.



Danielle Brady

Policy Analyst, European Policy Centre

As we stand on the cusp of the elections, it is helpful to pause to reflect on the progress achieved during the current mandate. In a historic milestone, the European Commission ushered in a new era with the appointment of Ursula von der Leyen as the first-ever female President, marking a significant step towards gender equality in leadership. This legislative period saw pivotal directives such as the Women on Boards Directive and Directive on Pay Transparency adopted, aiming to address gender disparities in leadership and the gender pay gap. Additionally, after months of intensive negotiations, a breakthrough was achieved with the agreement on the Directive on Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, albeit a watered-down version compared to what was first envisaged. However, while we can pause to acknowledge the strides we’ve made, it’s crucial not to indulge in self-congratulation.

In the context of the current era of permacrisis, gender equality must not be rescinded to a low-level priority. In fact, the current geopolitical context, the climate crisis

and changing demographics have gendered implications which must be properly recognised and reflected in policy responses. To achieve this, further recognition of the entrenched gender norms and systemic barriers that impede gender equality and diversity is needed. Gender inequalities accompanied by further intersectional inequalities cannot be fully addressed without an overhaul of the status quo. Achieving this transformation emphasises the critical importance of representation – not only in terms of descriptive representation but also in substantive terms.

Improving the diversity of elected officials is essential in addressing inequalities. However, this alone is not enough and must be combined with increased efforts to erode institutionalised norms and practices which produce and reproduce such detrimental inequalities in politics and policymaking.



Donika Emini
Executive Director, CiviKos Platform

The EU elections represent a crucial turning point for the future of the EU's internal affairs, agenda, and institutions. Beyond the internal aspects, elections are essential for the EU's global influence, particularly in regions undergoing enlargement, such as the Western Balkans, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, where the EU holds substantial structured influence. This role gained additional significance after 2022, following the extensive Russian aggression in Ukraine, during which the EU assumed a robust role, leading critical processes and exhibiting a long-awaited geopolitical emergence under women's leadership in the Commission and the EU Parliament.

2024 is poised to be significant, with crucial elections on the horizon. Given the need for strong leadership, especially amidst unpredictable U.S. elections, this

year presents a unique opportunity for the EU and its member states. It is a chance to shape its internal affairs and an occasion to seriously engage in pursuing strategic autonomy. The EU should aspire to fill the leadership gap ambitiously, stepping in as a global actor. Beyond securing its role as a security guarantor in the face of conflicts at its doorstep, the EU should actively assume the role of a prime defender and promoter of democracy within the EU in its enlargement regions.

Hence, having the privilege and opportunity to elect new leaders is crucial, as they will navigate complex challenges and chart a different course for the EU internally while enhancing its global role. Every EU citizen should value, privilege, and exercise this right. It is imperative for the future of EU citizens and those outside the EU who do not have the privilege of doing so.



Elena Lazarou
Head of the External Policies Unit, European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS)

Nothing should be taken for granted. It's an uncomfortable feeling but, as a woman from the European south, it's a familiar one. And so it is with democracy. Many of us were born not too long after many European countries returned to democracy following decades of repression and autocratic regimes implementing policies which did not take into account - nor cared for - citizens' preferences. Nor did they provide for a rules-based system which would offer citizens' the fundamental right gifted by democracy: the right to choose how one is governed; the right to approve or disapprove of state practices; the right to be represented by decision makers; the right to be an actor and not merely a subject; the right to be an equal party in the social contract.

Today, the European south has made huge leaps in that direction. Women have also made huge leaps. But just as women keep fighting for the irreversibility of their

rights, aware that there is no room for complacency, so should the democratic world defend the irreversibility of democracy. In authoritarian parts of the world, it is heroic actions like those of Alexei Navalny that carry the flag of that fight. But in our everyday life, it is this most routine act of civic engagement: our vote.

This year, almost half of the population of the world with the right to vote will have a chance to do so. In our 27 countries of the European Union, we will collectively decide on issues that matter to our lives, to the lives of others beyond our borders and to the lives of those that have still not been born. Nothing should be taken for granted and nothing should be underestimated. Not least, our power to determine the future through choosing our leaders and holding them accountable; the power to vote for democracy with quality. Happy International Women's Day and happy EU election year!



Elena Tudose

City Manager, Second District of Bucharest, Romania

Why does voting matter? Why should women care about elections?

Because we are more than half of the EU population and less than a third of us are involved in public decision-making, either at European, national or sub-national levels. Voting is the basic decision of whom we entrust amongst our fellow political representatives with our hopes and expectations for a better quality of life: for our communities, our families, our children and ourselves. We owe it to ourselves not to undertake that decision lightly.

Though we work more, we have a higher unemployment rate or we get paid less. We are expected to nurture and educate the next generations, but we struggle

with a disbalanced work-life cycle and glass ceilings. We shouldn't just wait to be noticed, we should take a stand, speak up and choose. Our policies, our politics, our leaders, our path. We owe it to ourselves to fully consider the implications.

The world as we know it changed dramatically since the last European elections in 2019. We overcame a global pandemic and are still facing a war at the very border of the European Union. Both had (and continue to have) critical effects on women across Europe and the world. Both have been overtly negative in terms of closing the gender gap: studies speak about "the five lost years". We owe it to ourselves to learn from all these experiences. And win the next five years for a gender equal Europe in 2030.



Eleonora Milazzo

Research Fellow, Migration Policy Centre and Associate Fellow, Egmont Institute

The much-acclaimed 2023 Italian comedy drama film, *There is still tomorrow* (C'è ancora domani), tells the story of a woman fighting back against abusive men and the poverty of post-World War II Rome. Against this backdrop, universal women's suffrage at the 1946 Italian institutional referendum becomes a transformative moment and the ultimate source of hope and empowerment.

Fast forward 80 years and the firm belief in the power of voting risks giving way to disillusionment. The EU faces global volatility, the securitisation of most policy domains and centripetal forces that pull towards the nation state and away from multilateralism, let alone deeper integration.

Projections suggest that the incoming European Parliament is likely to shift towards more eurosceptic positions. Considerable gains for far right parties will likely translate into a change in the EU's political priorities, further reinforcing polarisation and fragmentation around issues like migration, inequality, the green transition and support for Ukraine.

As grim as this outlook might seem, it would be a mistake not to uphold the power of voting to shape the future of the EU.

First, the projected rise of eurosceptic parties should push policymakers to engage with and mobilise pro-EU voters. The 2019 elections set an important precedent in this regard. Back then, despite – or, arguably, in reaction to – Brexit and widespread euroscepticism, the European elections saw the first increase in voter participation since 1979.

At the same time, EU policymakers should take stock of missed reform opportunities that could improve electoral participation. This is the case for the fight against disinformation and foreign influence through a comprehensive EU strategy. Similarly, the necessary reforms to increase transparency and preserve the integrity of EU democracy should be carried forward in the spirit of the Defence of Democracy Package, adopted in December 2023.

We can be confident that there will still be a 'tomorrow' for liberal democracy only if we acknowledge that the time to uphold it is now.



Elise Batchelor
History Student, University of Cambridge

As the EU parliamentary elections draw close, we have much to celebrate. We celebrate that, as of 2019, women represent 39.3% of parliament. We celebrate the presidency of Roberta Metsola MEP, the first female EU Parliament President since 2002 and only the third in the Parliament's history. We also celebrate women's active engagement in these elections; in 2019, 49% of EU voters were women.

Whilst we must, of course, celebrate these achievements, we must also remember that pretty poetry and fancy speeches alone do not deliver gender equality.

We should remember that your gender does not define your politics. Being a man does not make you a protector of the patriarchy. Being a woman does not absolve you of patriarchal thinking. The carceral system will not save us from male violence. In Malta, women do not have the agency to choose abortions. In 2021,

720 women in 17 EU member states were murdered by an intimate partner, family member or relative. Across the EU, almost one in two women have experienced psychological violence. Many forms of gender-based oppression still go unseen, unreported and undisturbed.

The legislative system will not fix systemic female oppression. Addressing electoral gender representation and the gender pay gap are only the tips of the iceberg. Far more must still be done. If the European Union wishes to deliver on gender equality, it must look beyond the orthodox means of addressing patriarchy.

I do not have all of the solutions to all of the problems I have outlined but I know that they must be addressed. I'm not demanding the dismantling of the capitalist system or a revolutionary matriarchy. We can do better though. Remember that in election time. Remember what you want for a better Europe.



Elizabeth Kuiper
Associate Director and Head of the Social Europe and Well-being Programme,
European Policy Centre

In her 2023 State of the Union address, Commission President Von der Leyen spoke about the ground-breaking and pioneering work on gender equality achieved during her mandate. Yet it is telling that she served as the first female President of the European Commission forty (!) years after Simone Veil was appointed as the first woman at the helm of the European Parliament in 1979, with only two female successors ever since.

According to data from the European Parliament, it is one of the world's most gender-balanced representative assemblies but gender equality varies drastically across countries and political groups in the Parliament. Another study, commissioned at the start of the current institutional mandate, shows that women account for only one-third of political decision-makers in Europe and around 15% of mayors.

This data shows that gender parity is still a long way off and cannot be taken for granted. The current political environment doesn't make me hopeful that we are heading in the right direction when, in June, 27 Member States go to the polls for the European Parliament elections.

Over recent years, we have seen that female leaders face more misogyny, sexism and threats of violence, supported by a toxic mix of the influence of social media and populist, right-wing politics. The next institutional cycle therefore needs to continue working not only on gender policies and diversity but equally on tackling online hate speech and content moderation, as these impact women disproportionately.

Progress on encouraging female participation in politics (including for women of colour) is at stake in the June European elections, ultimately affecting (the quality of) our democracies. After all, the challenges of our time such as climate change and eco-anxiety, demographics, technological threats and the broader geopolitical context demand inclusive politics.

Women constitute half of the world population and their participation matters, not only on International Women's Day.



Emma Woodford
Chief Operating Officer, European Policy Centre

Many of my colleagues in this paper are pointing to the fact that half of the world are voting in 2024. This means that roughly 1 in 4 of the planet's women are going to the polls. But are our political systems fit for purpose?

The UN Women's website states, 'just 15 countries have a woman Head of State, and 16 countries have a woman Head of Government' and, 'at the current rate, gender equality in the highest positions of power will not be reached for another 130 years.' In 2023, we saw the resignation of at least three female Heads of State. Sanna Marin, Jacinda Ardern and Nicola Sturgeon arguably had one thread in common; judgement-related resignations. Jacinda Ardern iterated that she didn't have 'enough left in the tank', Sanna Marin was widely criticised for enjoying a party and Nicola Sturgeon had had enough of the 'brutality' of being a politician. The lethal cocktail of exhausting competition and punishing social media

stoked by trolls from extremist or business interests took their toll. Which begs the question: where can democracy go now our predominant paradigms are so focused on competition rather than collaboration, and extraction rather than care, for people and the planet?

For too many people, the F-word, 'feminism', is a loaded, confronting word. I argue that those who find it so do not understand – or do not want to understand; the real message behind it. Feminist politics aims for equity, placing care and collaboration at the centre of action and debates. What better ways can there be to tackle the problems of the world head on than through radical empathy and standing up to corporate, political or military bullies than with such collaborative power? My message: vote for your nearest feminist politician, be they female or male.



Georgia Brooks
Founder and CEO, The Nine

What does gender equality look like in the future? What does Europe look like in the future?

Both questions can be answered by the same answer; greater gender diversity and representation.

2024 has been widely described as "the mother of election years." How painfully ironic then that women remain underrepresented across European politics and public life. How painfully ironic that women and people of minority backgrounds stand to be negatively impacted should certain individuals and policies succeed this year.

Of course, the progress and gains for gender equality in the last four years cannot be denied. However, nor should they be overpraised.

Sorry to burst any (Brussels) bubbles, but we're nowhere near equality yet. We congratulated ourselves in 2019 for having higher-than-world-average representation of women in the European Parliament, but until we reach 50% (or higher), the claps on the back can wait.

Furthermore, women in politics receive a disproportionate amount of abuse and harassment. According to Women Political Leaders, female parliamentarians receive one abusive message every two minutes.

To achieve true equality, we desperately need more diverse, more female leaders in decision making. In key decision making. These individuals need to be encouraged, welcomed and supported.

Sadly, politics remains a dirty game. Abuse, discrimination and harassment need not only to be removed from the rulebook, but struck out entirely from society.

Only by equal representation can the EU agenda on gender diversity move from mission statements and targets to action and impact.



Ilke Toygür

Director, IE Center for Innovation in Global Politics and Economics and Professor, IE University

European citizens are going to the polls in June. They are extremely important in shaping the future of the institutional set-up of the European Union and the road ahead for integration and policy responses. However, the European Parliament elections are only a piece of the broader super-electoral year puzzle. These elections will unfold against the backdrop of an increasingly challenging geopolitical environment, marked by shifting alliances, rising global tensions, and the ongoing consequences of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has recently entered its third year. The EP elections are also coupled with the presidential elections in the United States.

In recent years, the EU has been struggling with external pressures, ranging from the war on the continent to ever-growing tensions in the Middle East and great power rivalry between the United States and China. The EU has been adapting itself to respond to all these challenges. The outcome of the EP elections holds the potential to shape the trajectory of the EU, influencing policies that address

these multifaceted challenges for years to come. Two key considerations will play a role: if the political centre (of the EP but also the EU as a whole) holds, and if the EU manages to balance the urgent needs of citizens today with the necessary preparations for the challenges of tomorrow.

The rise of right-wing extremism adds a layer of complexity to the political landscape. Fuelled by concerns about sovereignty due to the triple transition—green, digital, and societal—poses a considerable challenge to the EU's cohesion. The overall support for these parties will decide if the political centre—a long-term guarantee of European integration—holds. If the political centre holds and is also reflected in other institutions, starting with the European Commission president, then the conversation about priorities, where, and how to spend the EU's resources will follow. The long-term policy and budget conversation—a conversation that is essential for the EU's resilience. The European Parliament elections hold the key to the EU's future.



Ionela Maria Ciolan

Research Officer, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies

2024 is “[the biggest election year in history](#)”, some call it the “[Voldemort of years](#)”, as democracy is weakened by growing authoritarian forces, while global political and security risks are heightened. This makes 2024 a year in history when the international system is at a crossroads between peace and a major war.

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, rising tensions in the Middle East, China's soaring geopolitical ambitions, the danger of an isolationist United States have led the EU to start developing its security and defence policy.

The EU has begun to cross the Rubicon. It is working to become a fully-fledged defence actor and is building its European Defence Union. These developments strengthen the European pillar of the North Atlantic Alliance and should be carried out in full complementarity with NATO. The EU should focus on strengthening Europe's defence industry and arms production capabilities, military mobility, filling strategic capability gaps, reforming the European institutional framework, but also creating a long-term vision for defence innovation through a European DARPA.

These issues will be important during the European Parliament elections, but even more so afterwards when the political groups will negotiate the EU's 2024-2029 strategic agenda.

If re-elected as President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen must put defence top of her agenda. She must create the post of Defence Commissioner, overseeing a Directorate-General for Defence, to better coordinate defence issues, and ensure an EU defence budget of at least 0.5% of EU GDP - around €100 billion - in addition to national budgets. Plus, she must set out a new EU defence strategy that creates a single market for defence, increases joint investment in EU defence capabilities, and focuses spending in Europe to preserve “good jobs” for taxpayers footing the bill.

For more than seven decades, the EU has been the world's most successful peace project. To preserve the ‘European way of life’, democracy and values, European policymakers must embrace the Roman proverb ‘Si vis pacem, para bellum’ (‘If you want peace, prepare for war’). The defence of European democracy begins with the elections on 6-9 June 2024!



Isabelle Ioannides,
European Parliamentary Research Service and Hellenic Foundation
for European and Foreign Policy

In a Europe faced with a complex geopolitical landscape, Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine at its eastern border and tangible insecurity in its immediate southern neighbourhood, as well as an inflationary spiral following the energy crisis, Simone de Beauvoir's wise words resonate strongly. "Never forget that all it takes is a political, economic or religious crisis for women's rights to be called into question. These rights can never be taken for granted. You must remain vigilant throughout your life." Despite significant wins for women's and girl's rights at EU and national levels, the European Commission reports high levels of gender-based violence, with women experiencing high levels of physical, sexual and psychological violence. Shockingly, between 45% to 55% of women in the EU have experienced sexual harassment since the age of 15, 43% of them have been subjected to some form of psychological violence by an intimate partner, and one in 10 women in the EU has been a victim of cyber harassment.

The European elections, scheduled for June 2024, are the largest democratic exercise in Europe to collectively

decide on the EU's future. They will be crucial in ensuring that the wins in women's rights are firmly set at the core of the EU and that the trend of gender-based violence is reversed. Political parties and the media alike will have a vital role to play as potential enablers. The language and messages disseminated during the campaign must be concrete, clear and rich in examples demonstrating how the European Parliament through its legislative, budgetary and oversight roles impacts EU citizens' everyday lives. This also means achieving women's equal representation, championing women's economic independence, incorporating female voices in peacebuilding, and ensuring women are part of the digital and green transitions. Electing representatives to the European Parliament that can carry this promise can help make women's everyday plight for parity a reality. Get your voting reminders [here](#).

The content of this article is the sole responsibility of the author and any opinions expressed herein should not be taken to represent an official position of the European Parliament.



Jacki Davis
Senior Adviser, European Policy Centre

As we approach the European elections, many of us are filled with trepidation about what the results might mean for ourselves, our societies, the EU and the world, amid widespread predictions of a surge in support for far-right populist parties and against the backdrop of rising geopolitical tensions which threaten to spiral out of control.

There has not been a moment in my lifetime when elections on either side of the Atlantic mattered as much as they do now: what happens in voting booths in Europe and America in 2024 could play a key role in determining what kind of world we will live in for years to come.

I understand why many people question whether there is any point in voting, feel their voices will not be heard or that 'all politicians are the same' and none of the parties understand or are willing to address their

concerns. But everyone involved in the upcoming election campaigns needs to work harder than ever to convince voters that we cannot afford the luxury of effectively saying 'none of the above' by staying at home on polling day.

It is not putting it too strongly to say that, in some countries, this time around, it is democracy itself that is on the ballot paper. Now more than ever, we need to stand up for our values, defend what we believe in and reject the arguments of those who seek to divide us, to build a world of 'them and us', to win support by fostering an atmosphere of hostility and hatred of 'the other'. Abstaining from voting will simply make it easier for them to succeed.

Women had to fight hard to win the right to vote in countries around the world – let's use International Women's Day to encourage them to use it.



Jana Juzova

Senior Research Fellow and Head of Programme, EUROPEUM
Institute for European Policy

Europe has faced many crises that seem to have shaken the trust of citizens in the EU and their national governments in their ability to deal with arising challenges and protect their populations from threats such as migration, covid-19 pandemic or war at the EU's border. It is increasingly easy for right-wing and populist politicians to mobilise voters with fear-igniting rhetoric, turning different societal groups against each other and offering simplistic solutions instead of searching for a sustainable and comprehensive way forward.

In the reactionist and fear-driven atmosphere that populist, nationalist and ultra-conservative parties feed into, many citizens do not feel heard or represented in the decision-making processes. We are being told that progressive thinking is bad and drives us away from solid traditional values. That ambitious policies and believing in a better tomorrow are naïve and the only way to survive in the increasingly challenging world is to close ourselves

off behind mental and physical walls, stick to our old ways and push back against any changes that make those benefiting from the status quo feel uncomfortable.

In the upcoming elections, it is of utmost importance that we demonstrate that as citizens of our countries and the EU, we have the confidence that we can handle the challenges of today's world and come out better than we were before. That our decisions do not have to be shaped by fear of the unknown and from "the other" but rather through dialogue and building of mutual understanding instead of capitalising on the existing divisions. However, for this dialogue to take place, adequate political representation of those traditionally marginalised is necessary – women, young people, sexual, gender and ethnic minorities. And the only way towards a more equal dialogue is through electing representatives of these groups and people who are willing to listen.



Jelena Vasiljevic

Senior Research Associate, Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory,
University of Belgrade

It is not figurative to say the world is exploding in violence today. Confidence in global leadership to resolve conflicts is waning by the day. Many feel adrift in this era of global disorder, filled with anxiety and a sense of moral and political disorientation. As we step into 2024, a year marked by significant elections globally, we're confronted with a crucial choice. Do we resign ourselves to the belief that our individual voices hold little sway in the face of overwhelming chaos? Or do we reclaim our right to influence our collective destiny through active participation in the political process?

For many, elections have devolved into a hollow semblance of democracy, where lofty ideals like accountability and democratic and human rights standards are mere rhetoric. Yet, in these trying times, we must not forget the hard-won privilege of shaping our political landscape – through political rights to choose, lead, and participate in political affairs.

My thoughts turn to the upcoming European elections, where I hold hope that fellow Europeans will embrace their civic duties and remind current and future representatives of the foundational vision of a united Europe. I believe this vision was of a socially just, diverse and equal Europe (a whole Europe!), a continent whose shores are welcoming to all, a cosmopolis always ready to condemn war and aggression, and to promote justice, whatever the political costs. If we fear that these ideals are overshadowed by petty politics, the responsibility falls on us, the citizens, to redirect the course and reignite our political agency, starting with the simple act of voting.



Joanna Maycock
European Women's Rights Campaigner

As we strive for a feminist Europe that delivers women's rights and gender equality for all, the European Union is at a pivotal juncture, where urgent action is needed to accelerate progress. Despite gender equality being enshrined in EU Treaties, progress has been sluggish, with national ministers responsible for gender equality sidelined from formal power structures.

During the Belgian Presidency of the EU on February 26-27, 2024, an informal gathering of EU Ministers for Gender Equality, hosted by Belgian State Secretary for Equality Marie-Colline Leroy, marked a decidedly rare occasion. This event was crucial given the scant opportunities for these ministers to convene, strategise, and scrutinise legislation despite gender equality being central to EU values. It comes ahead of the first EVER formal meeting of Gender Equality Ministers within the "Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs" Council in May.

The absence of dedicated forums has resulted in diminished political will and watered down action on tackling gaps in pay and care; addressing violence against women; and ensuring equal representation and treatment of women in all their diversity. Despite rightly celebrating the recent Directive on Violence Against Women, its effectiveness was compromised by protracted negotiations between the European Parliament and the Council, who removed provisions on rape and sexual harassment.

The recent informal ministerial meeting underscored the need for more robust EU action to progress on gender equality. Most member states expressed support for enhancing the formal space for gender equality within the Council to forge political alliances and foster dialogue.

Amidst a concerning and persistent backlash against gender equality, establishing a formal Ministerial Meeting on Gender Equality within the Council would send a resolute message and reaffirm the EU's commitment to gender equality.



Jovana Marovic
Member of the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG)
and Former Deputy Prime Minister of Montenegro

As a student, I chose the European Parliament as a topic for my thesis. I was interested in the only institution of a supranational community that was elected by direct universal suffrage but also in the paradox that the only directly-elected EU institution is one of the causes of the EU's lack of democracy.

The European Parliament should be a key backbone in a reformed and stronger Union in which federal elements would prevail but would not turn it into a federation. Much has changed in the position and strength of the Parliament since my student life, but the essence has not, and it is an issue from which we should start all discussions about the future of the Union.

What has also not changed and should not change is the fact that democracy begins with citizens' right to choose those who will make decisions in their best interest. In Montenegro, citizens could not replace one government (political party) for thirty years. Now citizens can see that change is possible through elections and they use this 'benefit' wholeheartedly.

Aside from some clear limitations on the European Parliament, it is, in most areas, an equal decision-maker with the Council of the European Union. By choosing their political favourites, EU citizens influence how policy areas will be shaped in the next five years. Let's not forget that much of the legislation with a direct impact on European citizens' lives is adopted at EU level.

As a citizen of the Western Balkans, I would like enlargement – with a clear agenda and vision of how the EU will become wider, stronger, and better – to be well-represented in the election. As citizens from the Western Balkans cannot vote in these elections, this should be a motivation for EU citizens.

Due to growing nationalism, populism and strengthening of right-wing forces, a vote for progressive parties demonstrates that citizens support the safeguarding of democracy and EU values. Voting differentiates an individual: you are your choices (Sartre).



Katarina Tadic

Programme Manager, European Fund for the Balkans

On 17 December 2023, the Serbian government blatantly stole the parliamentary and local elections. This was the culmination of a twelve-year-long gradual deterioration of every and each democratic and rule of law standard in the country. The elections were marred by vote-buying, massive illegal migration of voters, carousel voting, domination and involvement of President Vučić in a clear breach of the country’s Constitution, total control of the media, and misuse of public resources. Immediately after the elections, civil society and the pro-democratic opposition called for a full investigation and organised a series of massive protests.

Less than two months after the election, on 8 February, the European Parliament adopted a resolution stating that the latest Serbian parliamentary and local elections fell “below the expected standards for an EU candidate country”. An overwhelming majority of MEPs agreed that elections were marked by numerous procedural

deficiencies and called for independent investigations into the electoral fraud, confirming the findings of Serbia’s civil society.

This example illustrates why the upcoming EU elections are important for enlargement countries. The European Parliament has been a longstanding ally of those fighting to preserve democratic reforms and a critic of those who obstruct them. Now, as we anxiously observe the surge of populist far right parties and fear their ability to influence the EU agenda, our worlds and our societies are intertwined. A boost for populist parties in the EU is a boost for populists at home. This could present a mortal blow to democracies around the EU’s neighbourhood.

For the sake of us who are on the “outside”, we hope that after 10 June, we will still have friends in the European Parliament willing to stand up for democracy and the rule of law and our dream to join the EU.



Laura Rayner

Senior Policy Analyst, European Policy Centre

Over a five-year period since 2017, a group of largely female Prime Ministers worked together as part of the Wellbeing Economy Governments partnership (WEGo) to create new metrics that go beyond GDP, and instead use indicators that better capture societal progress.

Former First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, former Prime Minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern, and Prime Minister of Iceland, Katrín Jakobsdóttir, did groundbreaking work to develop and promote well-being economies. They were later joined by Sanna Marin, former Prime Minister of Finland, and the Welsh Government, led by Mark Drakeford but whose work on this agenda has been significantly shaped by the efforts of Jane Davidson and Sophie Howe.

This work is also underway in the EU institutions and this legislative period has witnessed significant progress. The 8th Environment Action Programme led by Grace O’Sullivan MEP saw the EU enshrine in law the need to enable systemic change to an EU economy that ensures well-being within planetary boundaries. The Beyond

Growth Conference of May 2023 saw Commission President von der Leyen state that, “economic growth is not an end in itself and it must not destroy its own foundations. Growth must serve people and future generations.” The European Commission’s Resilience Dashboards have been designed to help navigate societal transformations towards a more sustainable development path.

As we approach the next European Parliament elections, this momentum must be built upon. Changing mindsets, overcoming vested interests and finding new ways to monitor and assess progress has required vision, courage and determination. The next legislature must have representatives who are willing to shift away from traditional male-dominated approaches to politics and economics. They must take the long-term perspective, and recognise that – despite the political benefits of offering easy, short-term solutions – the only responsible pathway to an equitable and sustainable existence is one which embraces the complexity of the interrelated challenges we face.



Maja Fjaestad
Senior Adviser, European Policy Centre

It is a privilege to have the right to vote; a privilege that many inhabitants of the world lack. One could also argue that voting not only is a privilege but also an obligation. The European elections in June are central for many aspects of society.

A topic high on the European agenda is the future of Artificial Intelligence (AI). This might seem like a technological issue; it is, however, highly political. Developing and deciding the future of AI is about inclusion, equality and representation, as well as about building a better and more integrated Europe.

The data, on which today's AI is trained, provides poor prerequisites for equality because of bias in terms of gender, class and ethnicity. It doesn't have to be that way, with awareness and precaution about data bias.

Innovation exists and is developed in a context where culture, society, institutions, regulations, and technological development must be put under the scrutiny of democracy. At the same time, we need to make sure that innovation benefits everyone in society. It's a highly political choice whether new technology should be used to increase equality or the opposite. Therefore it is important to demand responsibility for these choices from the politicians of Europe.

As a special plea on March 8; vote to be a part of our technological future! AI is not half as intelligent, without the participation of a broad representation of voices, reflecting the diversity of the EU. Let us all be a part of constructing both society and technology – the future is too important to be left to men alone.



Maria Giulia Amadio
Adjunct Professor, LUISS University and Visiting Fellow,
Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies

With the European Parliament elections upcoming and the risk of anti-European populist forces becoming more dominant, the EU is once again in the uncomfortable situation of having to justify itself. Of justifying not only its choices over the past years, but also its own existence. Those of us who have dedicated our studies and professional careers to the European integration project and the EU's role in the world cannot but feel a deep sense of frustration. This frustration is also mixed with pride when thinking of the EU response to the war in Ukraine. But it is also coupled with disillusionment when thinking of the divisions within the EU regarding the conflict between Israel and Hamas.

Let's be honest: the European elections are not going to change the structural weaknesses of the EU's institutional construction. They are not even going to

bring member states together on divisive issues. What they can do, however, is to give a voice to the frustration of European citizens in a constructive manner. In a manner that does not entail emptying the European project from within, as sovereigntists aim to do, but nourishing it through constructive criticism.

Changes can happen, albeit slowly. For such changes to happen, however, the EU needs a parliament that has strong backing from European citizens. It needs a parliament that has the legitimacy to hold EU leaders to account for their actions or lack thereof. And it needs a parliament that has the strength to push boundaries. Casting our vote is certainly a first step towards achieving that.



Marialena Stagianni
Programme Assistant, European Policy Centre

I dream that the role, influence and power of women will be enhanced within the EU. While strides have been taken towards achieving gender equality, further action is required. In my vision for the EU, women hold key positions within European institutions, national and regional governments and in non-public sector roles, such as consulting and advocacy. I dream of women's voices being amplified in decision-making on crucial issues like climate change, human rights, and scientific, financial, and legal matters.

With several EU countries already allowing citizens to vote from age 16, there is a need for better education on EU affairs in schools. Many young citizens, including girls and women, lack understanding of the significance of EU elections, particularly in marginalised communities. Thus, concrete courses on EU history, culture, and language should be integrated into early education to foster EU citizenship and identity. The still-existing patriarchal culture and conservative social narratives in European countries could be addressed by

empowerment and leadership training for young women along with gender courses for young men and women to understand the roots of gender inequality.

While the current European youth has a stronger sense of a common European identity than previous generations, it remains somewhat limited. The rise of the far-right and Euroscepticism further threatens European identity. Improving and effectively communicating opportunities, such as youth exchanges offered by the Erasmus Plus programme, would facilitate interaction, communication, cultural exchange, and a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives and opinions and enrich European identity, embodying the true spirit of "United in Diversity."

A deeper European integration requires nurturing a common identity, with the younger generation pivotal to the EU's future. I dream of an outcome of the upcoming EU elections, that prioritizes policies benefiting young people and women.



Dr Marika Djolai
Independent Scholar and Member of the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG)

In 2024, with 64 elections scheduled worldwide, the role of voters is crucial. Few people are optimistic in the current climate, where death has become a synonym for everyday life in Palestine and Ukraine, and many are nervous about the largest test of democracy in recent years. With a Doomsday Clock reading ninety seconds to midnight, the stakes are high, with virtually equal weight given to climate change, democracy and peace concerns. This compels us to look for rising stars who can deliver stability within this triangle.

These generators of stability, in my view, are women, comprising a mighty voting force. Being more active and determined about political choices they make, women today are forcing strategists to design tailored campaigns to win their votes. This demographic group is powerful enough to bring about change through elections and by taking leadership roles. However, they must be encouraged to vote, especially in the European elections, to achieve a far higher turnout than in 2019.

How to motivate them? Social issues such as care and education tend to matter more to women than men.

Overall, they also give a higher priority to medical care and climate. The political parties running for the European elections should prioritise these issues in their policies and ensure gender mainstreaming in political representation to encourage women to vote.

Women perform better in leadership roles when it comes to important topics like climate change, equitable and inclusive governance and management of natural resources, and inclusive decision-making processes. To accurately reflect equal gender representation in the composition of the European Parliament, women's involvement in parliamentary committees and in important jobs within the European Commission must be ensured after the elections. This encourage advancements towards a sustainable and gender-equal future, and peaceful societies.

Finally, this year is also a re-election test for several exceptional women already in leadership positions. My personal support goes to Maia Sandu of Moldova. I hope she wins big!



Milena Mihajlovic

Programme Director, European Policy Centre (CEP), Belgrade

The most recent elections in Serbia in December 2023 speak volumes about the fragility of democracy and how it should never be taken for granted. The democratic polity requires constant work, popular scrutiny, and citizens' participation. Although it has been a candidate country for EU membership for over a decade, Serbia now serves as an example of democratic backsliding in Europe.

One important lesson from the latest Serbian elections relates to the challenge of increasing voter turnout. Despite massive mobilisation by civil society and prominent only 59.1% of Serbians voted in 2023, compared to 58.6% in 2022. The democratic opposition had sought to tap into the large pool of abstainers but did so with little success.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it has proven especially difficult to engage young voters, who appear less interested in politics than their more senior fellows. Older political candidates seem unable to meet younger generations at their preferred locations, which tend to be social

media, e.g. TikTok. Engaging with youngsters on social media platforms requires commitment, inventiveness, flexibility, and tailored social-media marketing support. Young people tend to respond better to concrete causes and initiatives that promise tangible change (e.g. environmental or social), rather than to general political ideas and ideologies. This makes young generations a more difficult electorate to win over and requires perseverance from candidates. Empowering young people and convincing them about how their vote can help shape their future is key if the gen-Z and younger millennials are to vote.

As the EU prepares for its EP elections, the question remains: will candidates make a genuine effort to devise campaigns that are more appealing to young voters and succeed in bringing them in? The response could shape the EU legislature and policy agenda for the next five years. In the face of today's extremely turbulent geopolitical times, learning from Serbia's example is more important than ever for member states' politicians.



Milena Muk

Researcher, Institute Alternative

Dreamers shift realities.

That is why we need more leaders committed to turning dreams of better democracy into reality, especially nowadays, when global developments once more confirm that democracy and progress are not taken for granted and that they do not necessarily mature with time. With the elections in the European Parliament approaching, these challenges cannot be overlooked.

For Montenegro, the country I come from, which is allegedly standing first in line to join the enlarged European Union, these elections are important for various reasons. The new leadership within the EU institutions will largely determine whether we will stand still or start moving along a clearer roadmap, which would more effectively reconcile the dilemma between widening and deepening the EU.

The elections will determine the predominant composition and leadership of the European Parliament and, consequently, of the European Commission.

After the outbreak of war in Ukraine, the Commission has started to rethink enlargement and experiment with new approaches, which recently started to be operationalised more clearly through the Growth and Reform Facility for the Western Balkans., The adoption of this plan, involving new funds and loans for the region, is still pending before the European Parliament. We have already seen MEPs voicing concerns over the lack of clear and measurable benchmarks of reform and the lack of safeguards of funds in cases of stagnation or backsliding. Whether the new European Parliament will take up the initiatives to reinvigorate enlargement, or once more side-line the enlargement agenda, is something that bears great significance for the region.

Regardless of the "errors" of Europeanisation, Western Balkans have learnt a lot from the EU. Further political socialisation of our elites and citizens into the EU-wide debate is needed. I hope that this relationship will acquire new and improved dynamics after the upcoming elections.



Natasha Wunsch

Professor of European Studies, University of Fribourg

The upcoming elections to the European Parliament in June will be one of the key milestones in a crucial electoral year for Europe. As the continent continues to face economic difficulties, increasingly divisive debates around migration, and the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine, mainstream parties must seize the chance to formulate bold and courageous messages on the future of European integration: what is the added value of coming together as 27 member states to develop joint responses to the political and economic tensions confronting the European continent? How can a common migration policy balance the moral duty to support refugees with growing concerns in the population over their economic impact and successful integration? Which perspective is the EU willing to offer its latest candidate countries Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, but also those from the Western Balkans?

In 2019, the turnout for the EP elections increased for the first time. However, the increase in participation at the EU level did not translate into a decisive vote against the

rising tide of populist forces inside the EP. Eurosceptic voices that call into question the benefits and rationale of EU-level cooperation currently represent almost a quarter of MEPs. Their seat share is likely to rise further following the upcoming elections. Coupled with the external challenges Europe faces, this critique from the inside adds pressure on the European project.

Given the uncertain outcome of the US elections, Europe needs to come together around a shared vision of its future. In this climate, a clear positioning of pro-European actors will be key: only if European citizens feel that mainstream parties understand their anxieties and are able to propose credible solutions can they be expected to choose cooperation over withdrawal, solidarity over fear-mongering. For the future of Europe, these messages need to be delivered – and hopefully understood and acted upon by voters across the continent.



Nicoletta Pirozzi

Head of Programme and Institutional Relations Manager,
Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

2024 will be a momentous electoral year worldwide and could represent a dangerous turning point for European democracies. Polls suggest that eurosceptic, populist and extremist political forces will gain weight in the EU institutions and different member states. The future of European integration will be influenced by the rise of these radical forces and the extent of their impact will depend on the degree of their success.

We know for sure that the political debate risks being poisoned by a confrontational spirit, a by-product of the radicalisation of public discourse, which those radical parties and political forces are currently championing. The phenomenon will also be fuelled by external actors who want to destabilise European democracies and create fractures in the European consensus, such as Russia, which uses social media interference techniques and more traditional political influence like providing financial support for fringe parties.

Such radicalisation will also impact the discourse about women and gender, thus exacerbating the opposite tendencies of hypermasculinity and radical feminism. The resulting polarisation will likely not result in a more constructive and productive debate: on the contrary, it is probably going to plunge the level of debate lower and lower, thus making it impossible to develop a Europe-wide consensus over a more advanced conception of women and gender in contemporary society.

Therefore, it is important to mobilise as much as possible the pro-European electorate given the upcoming EU polls and, at the same time, promote an open, fair, moderate and tolerant debate about Europe, especially for contested topics such as gender. We should not let violent and intolerant speech hijack and derail the political discourse. Democracy is at stake and we need to protect it by nurturing a culture of dialogue and respect.



Peggy Maguire

Director General, European Institute of Women's Health

The European Institute of Women's Health, recently co-hosted the launch of the Women's Health Interest Group (WHIG) at the European Parliament, bringing together key stakeholders and a diverse group of MEPs, to strengthen EU women's health policy and work towards an EU strategy for women's health.

A strategic approach to women's health means transferring into policy and programming the scientific knowledge gathered over 20 years on sex and gender differences between men and women. This approach considers the specific health needs of women when planning, designing, and implementing healthcare within different age groups, ethnic and sexual minorities, rural and urban areas and providing for women with different disabilities, physical and mental health needs and the social determinants that impact health.

Membership of the European Union has been a positive force for equality in EU Member States. A breakthrough was the EU Clinical Trial Regulation No536/2014, making

the consideration of gender and age mandatory in clinical trials on drugs and the EU Beating Cancer Plan, which includes actions on women specific cancers. Recently the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union agreed on the European Commission's proposal for a Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence. These examples demonstrate how powerful Europe can be at advancing key issues that affect women's health.

Over the next five years, the EU Commission and Parliament will make important decisions and laws on key issues affecting women's lives. The European elections give a once in a five-year opportunity to have women's diverse voices heard. It is crucial that the next European Parliament has a strong mandate to prioritise women's health. Women must participate to influence the outcome of the EU and activate their vote to send strong leaders to Europe, who will deliver on women's health in the next EU mandate.



Rabea Schmucker

Intern, European Policy Centre

Studies consistently highlight low voter turnout among young people across Europe, particularly in the European elections. This not only raises concerns about the health of democratic participation but also underscores the urgent need to amplify youth voices in political decision-making processes.

Political participation is the cornerstone of any functioning democracy. It serves as a crucial mechanism for controlling government action, ensures representation, and enables citizens to advocate for the changes they wish to see. However, the question of who participates in political decision-making remains a defining feature of democracy. Avoiding the exclusion of certain groups, such as young people, in the EU's political process is crucial.

This is particularly important because the EU's aging population often shapes policy priorities in a way that neglects the concerns of younger generations. Young people's political priorities lie in tackling social inequality, combating climate change, and increasing job

opportunities. As older demographics dominate voter turnout, there's a risk of policies being skewed toward the interests of older generations, potentially sidelining issues vital to the future well-being of young people.

Moreover, young people are underrepresented in parliament. The percentage of MEPs younger than 30 rarely exceeds 2 percent, a trend that is particularly unfavorable to young women. The average age of MEPs in the current European parliament is 52. This lack of representation of young people diminishes the legitimacy of democratic institutions.

As we approach the European elections, it's therefore imperative to empower young people to vote and bridge the gap between political institutions and the youth. It is crucial to incorporate youth perspectives into policy discussions and decision-making processes to better address the needs of future generations. Only through meaningful representation and engagement can we ensure a democracy that truly reflects the diversity and aspirations of all citizens.



Rebecca Castermans

Spokesperson for the Belgian Minister of Development Cooperation and Major Cities

Every week, in a basement just outside Kiev, a few dozen teens huddle together for a mental health event. They share stories and tips on how to deal with the anxiety of living in a country at war. Although they have spent a big portion of their lives indoors or underground – pre-war, there was Covid-19 – and loved ones are on the frontlines, they manage to stay sane but also hopeful. All of them look forward to a future in which they will be EU citizens.

In that basement, the values of democracy, equality, pluralism and freedom – values the EU prides itself on – stop being abstract notions. Taken for granted throughout most of Europe, Ukrainians are willing to make unimaginable sacrifices, even die, for these ideals.

These are also values many fear are at stake in the European elections, where extremist and far-right parties are expected to win big. Riding a wave of societal existential dread, these parties promise voters to turn back the clock to an imagined, simpler past where ‘men could be men’, women mothers or mistresses, and everyone looked the same. In the coming months, countless debates will ask how the extremist surge can be stopped; how centrist parties can regain people’s trust; how we can save democracy.

Although these exercises will be useful, pro-democracy forces should keep one thing in mind: how to play the long game. Extremist movements tend not to think in terms of election cycles, but rather focus on the long-term. They don’t let losses distract them from their goals, no matter how long it takes to reach them. They keep pushing. If pro-democracy forces are to push back, we must put in the same amount of dedication.

Recent world events have given us crude but necessary reminders: that hard-won rights can be reversed; that we can no longer take our democracy, freedom and safety for granted; and that progress is neither guaranteed nor automatic, but rather the result of continuous, sustained and intentional effort.

The elections on 9 June matter. But history won’t end on 10 June. The fight will continue. The far right knows this. Those Ukrainian teens know it, too. They are playing the long game. Everyone who cherishes democracy, equality, pluralism and freedom should be prepared to do the same.

These views do not reflect the views of the Minister or the Belgian government.



Rosa Balfour

Director, Carnegie Europe

Women’s rights are under attack around the world. In Europe, women’s rights have been the canary in the mine for the dismantling of liberal democracy. Whether the issue is shutting down university courses on gender studies (in Hungary) or restricting reproductive rights (in Poland, under the government led by Law and Justice), attacks on women’s rights are often a prelude to wider restrictions to human rights (LGTBIQ in particular, but also minority rights) and to institutions that guarantee fundamental rights, such as the judiciary. In this sense, women’s rights concern everyone, not just half the population.

The attack on women’s rights is deliberate and organised. The political forces proposing ultra conservative family values for European women often find alliance with likeminded global organizations, from the Evangelical Church, the Organisation for the Islamic Conference, the Orthodox Church. They gather in conferences, such as the Budapest Demographic Summit, pursue their positions in multilateral organisations, and undermine the EU’s and UN’s values-based international agenda.

New [research](#) is also revealing uncomfortable global trends among the youth: the gender gap is widening with women between the age of 18 and 30 embracing progressive values and men ultra conservative ones. Add this to the opinion polls indicating that the shift towards the radical right is consolidating for the upcoming European Parliament elections, and there are real grounds for concern. After long held battles for emancipation, there is a convergence of forces willing to take away hard-won rights from women.

Participating in elections has become less popular in advanced European democracies. Yet the simple act of showing up on election day and voting for parties that will defend the rights of women can make a difference in a political context where minority opinion manages to amplify its influence thanks to divided majorities, disengaged publics, and polarising media coverage. Europe remains a leading light in supporting international human rights – but its action needs public support.



Shada Islam
Senior Adviser, European Policy Centre

Last year, Commission President von der Leyen said that she wanted a Europe “where it doesn’t matter what you look like, who you love, how you pray, and where you are born.” To turn that commitment into action, I look forward to seeing the Commission chief – and other female politicians – becoming less Eurocentric and more inclusive not only in words but also in actions.

This means including black and brown European women as equal partners and co-creators in policy-making. It means being less selective in showing solidarity with women and girls in the Global South - and not forgetting the dire humanitarian crisis facing women in Gaza.

Much needs to be done. The Commission’s Anti-Racism Action Plan, crafted hastily in the wake of the death of George Floyd, was a well-intentioned attempt to tackle Europe’s structural and systemic racism. However, it has been watered down and implementation is patchy.

A report by the EU’s Fundamental Rights Agency underlines that almost half of all people of African

descent in the EU, including women, face racism and discrimination in their daily lives and that anti-Semitism and Islamophobia are on the rise. An EU funded project points to verbal and physical violence directed at Muslim European women, especially those who wear the hijab.

With far right parties expected to increase their number, role and influence after the EP elections, the work of anti-racism will become much harder. One way to push back would be to ensure a better representation of European women of colour in the new European Parliament. This means pressing political parties to put black and brown women in electable seats, and insisting that, once elected, these politicians are appointed to positions of power.

European feminists are often criticised for not being inclusive. As Europeans go to the polls, it’s important to move beyond a “white feminist” agenda and work for gender equality for all European and non-European women.



Sophia Russack

Researcher, Centre for European Policy Studies

Parliamentary representation is at the heart of democracy. However, the European Parliament elections are still perceived as second-order national elections, with lower turnout, debates framed around domestic issues, and low media coverage. We see greater support for fringe and Eurosceptic parties relative to established parties, as citizens vote less strategically ('with their head') or according to their ideological preferences ('with their heart'), but rather as a form of protest ('with their boot').

Turnout increased in 2019 for the first time, but still, only every second European votes for the EP. People still don't care as much about EP elections because they are not very visible. Voters still do not know enough about what their elected representatives do in Brussels and how they organise themselves.

The EP has made two attempts in recent times to increase the visibility of EP elections and European political parties by harmonising electoral law.

Unfortunately, these attempts have met resistance from Member States and therefore, the same (largely unharmonised) rules will apply to the election in June. For now, EP elections remain as 27 national elections rather than one genuinely European election.

Nonetheless, increasing the visibility of EP elections at national level is so important that there should be some informal and voluntary progress in the 2024 election campaign. National parties must familiarise EU voters with how they are integrated into European political parties and EP political groups. They should commit to displaying the logos of the European political party they are affiliated with on all electoral and campaign material, such as leaflets and billboards. Furthermore, they should publish the political programmes in the top section of their websites' homepages to make them visible. This would contribute to enhancing the visibility of European political parties and the EP elections for voters



Susan Danger

CEO, AmCham EU

In 2024, more than two billion people across dozens of countries have already gone or will have the opportunity to vote for their future; statistically speaking, half of them will be women. When women participate in the electoral process, we bring attention to our concerns, priorities and hopes. In an era of democratic backsliding, our voices must be heard, now more than ever.

As CEO of AmCham EU – an organisation dedicated to building a strong and united Europe and maintaining and strengthening the transatlantic relationship – I know that we can't achieve our goals without the full participation of half of our population. Moreover, Europe's attractiveness for investment depends on fair and resilient institutions and societies. These, in turn, are founded upon democracies that draw their legitimacy from civic participation.

The upcoming European elections are a turning point for the EU. Despite great advances in standards of living, many of Europe's diverse communities have unequal

access to healthcare, education, housing and economic opportunities. Any type of discrimination threatens to hinder economic, political and cultural progress across the EU.

Government, business and civil society must work together to provide equal opportunities for everyone while also promoting the values of democracy, rule of law and human rights. I am proud of the progress AmCham EU and our member companies have made through diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives in both our offices and our communities. To build on the private sector's efforts, during the upcoming European Parliament mandate, our elected officials must support a qualified European workforce, reinforce democratic practices and provide opportunities for inclusion across society.

Our individual choice to participate and vote in June is a step towards creating a Europe that is equitable, diverse and inclusive. I encourage all eligible EU citizens to join me in making our voices heard.



Tana Foarfă

Director, Europuls – Centre of European Expertise and Economic and Fiscal Affairs Advisor, European Parliament

I was 14 years old when Romania entered the EU. I remember that moment as if it was yesterday, because it impacted me profoundly. Partly because the accession moment I was watching on TV opened a whole new world to me, and partly because the images of EU global leaders were showing so few women! That was the moment in which my dream started to shape.

Since then, I have been dreaming of a European Union with gender balanced official photos. Because women belong anywhere they want, especially in places where political decisions are being made.

I dream of a Union in which we have confidence in young people and we understand we need their energy and creativity. A Union in which youth are at the forefront, in which their minds are free to shape the agenda, their voices free to empower and their ideas free to develop and innovate Europe.

This year we, as European citizens, have a huge responsibility. On June 6-9 we vote for our present and our future, but we also decide the future of other people. We decide whether the door still remains open for other countries to join our European family, whether we further advance our green and digital policies, whether we make our Union more flexible in decision-making and whether we make space for young generations to design agile public policies.

This year I dream that my country has the courage to send young leaders, especially women European Parliament. My generation deserves to be seen and heard, and women deserve to stand up for themselves.



Una Hajdari

Journalist, Politico Europe

My main frustration with the way people perceive EU elections is that they get fired up and angry when extremists win, but then sit on the sidelines for the rest of the mandate instead of getting involved. Over time, I've realized the far-right and inflammatory figures know how to wield their power within the system a lot better than more moderate voices— they've mastered the rules and know how to twist them in their favour.

Voting is crucial, but true civic engagement goes beyond the ballot box. It means staying informed and engaged year-round. As journalists, we're tasked with breaking down complex issues and making them accessible to all. But if people find EU policies dull, and fail to stay on top of new developments, how can we expect politicians to prioritise our concerns? The bridge between journalists and politicians is the people, and while we are happy to put all the right tools and information in their hands, it's up to individuals to apply pressure on their leaders for change.

March 8 holds deep political significance for me — a day to reflect on strides made in political representation and issues affecting women and women-identifying members of our society. While increased female leadership in top positions of power is commendable, I value genuine strength and vibrancy over token gestures. Here again, hard-right parties are more likely to boast outspoken, decisive women, unlike many centrist or center-left counterparts. Too often, moderate women conform to traditional gender roles so as to not cause too many waves, and avoid controversy to fit in. This approach only hinders progress.

My message ahead of the elections is clear: don't hesitate to engage, speak up for your political needs, and support those advocating for your rights. Whether by backing dedicated leaders or getting directly involved, your participation is crucial.



Verena Ringler
Director, AGORA European Green Deal

In December 2019, Ursula von der Leyen presented the European Green Deal (EGD), a paramount roadmap for future generations. Usually, when a European Commission President launches a grand project – think of the Euro introduction, or big enlargement rounds—national and sectoral leaders follow suit, explaining the thought behind a coming strategic framework. They set off cascades of political and stakeholder communication, even if they oppose specific elements.

In the case of the EGD, the top dogs remained silent. No prominent speeches were dedicated to its defence. COVID came, and war hit; cabinet members argued, shrugging. Five years later, this roadmap is in danger.

Yet today's bad press and frail position of the EGD contrast sharply with the findings from an early-stage field study I undertook with 50 subnational leaders in three Austrian federal states in 2020/21. Then, a mixed group of CEOs and climate activists, mayors and spatial planners welcomed the EGD in principle. They underlined

that the path to climate neutrality was an executive matter, belonging to the C-Suite of political, business, educational and social organisations. They said the biggest risks surrounding the EGD were of a political, cultural, and communicative nature. They asked to raise awareness about the costs of procrastination and inaction.

A museum director in Lake Constance stated that if she had two minutes with Ursula von der Leyen, she would urge her to sign up and mandate rural female leaders to implement the Green Deal. This group's operational and strategic empowerment could unleash positive change on many levels.

Right now, every voice counts, female and male, urban and rural. Every local or business reformer matters. Every speech, roundtable, or town hall event in defence of the EGD can make a difference. Showing up with a “yes” is key when the stage is crowded by loud naysayers. To paraphrase a famous slogan of the Washington Post, “The European Green Deal dies in darkness”.



Veronica Cretu
Co-Founder, Innovating Governance; Member, Access Info Group,
The Council of Europe and Founder, Moldova4EU Diaspora Task Force

Democracy is not given; it is earned through the tireless efforts of individuals committed to upholding its principles. Globally, a historic number of voters are poised to participate in elections, with democratic governance facing a significant trial: an estimated 4 billion individuals across over 50 nations—nearly half of the global population—are scheduled to participate in national elections.

Amid Russia's war in Ukraine, the European elections gain added importance. Supporting Ukraine isn't just about standing in solidarity with a fellow European nation; it's about defending the principles of democracy and sovereignty and acknowledging that Europe still has a clear sky due to brave Ukrainian warriors. The Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine underscores the EU's imperative to strengthen its democratic foundations, ensuring resilience against external threats. Embracing female leadership in the EC and Parliament can catalyze positive change, fostering diversity and effective governance.

Moldova's recent green light for EU accession negotiations represents a hard-won step forward, signalling a shared commitment to democratic governance, rule of law, and

European integration. However, Russia will do whatever it takes to undermine Moldova's EU integration journey, destabilising the country further. The recent moves in Transnistria are evidence of upcoming escalations. Support from our European partners is crucial to protect Moldova's democratic aspirations. However, this necessitates Europe's own safeguarding of democracy. It requires countering Kremlin propaganda and disinformation, and fostering awareness through factual information. Europe must cultivate leaders capable of critical thinking to navigate these challenges effectively.

As a member of the Moldovan and Romanian diaspora in the EU, I understand the critical role we, diaspora members, play in advancing our nations' interests and democratic values within Europe. We cannot overlook the freedoms democracy offers; instead, we must actively participate in the democratic process, advocate for transparency, accountability, and inclusivity, and strive tirelessly to rebuild Peace4ALL.

#SlavaUkraini



Xheimina Dervishi
Programme Assistant, European Policy Centre

Today the European Parliament is considered one of the most gender-balanced representative assemblies in the world, however only [39,3% of MEPs are women](#), with a large disparity between Member States and political parties. Much has indeed been achieved in the last few years, for example, today, two of the main EU institutions are led by women, something that couldn't be imagined a few years ago. But is it enough?

The upcoming European elections in June represent an important occasion to highlight the importance of enhancing the level of equality between genders. In a historical time where women's rights and civil liberties are threatened by far-right parties, it is also crucial to keep an eye on how the European Parliament will change after the elections in terms of gender representation. The results will influence not only the policy direction of the EU in specific areas linked to gender but also the distribution of women working inside the parliament.

If we consider the European Parliament as the workplace for administrators, assistants, and staff in general, we can see no difference from other parliaments where gendered norms and hierarchies are still persistent. Furthermore, except for the presidents of the European Commission and the European Parliament, seeing other women in top positions within the institutions is still something far from reality. Moreover, important committees that work towards the achievement of gender equality such as the FEMM Committee, made up of [roughly 89% female members](#), are unfortunately not considered to be among the top ones, which instead are mainly composed by men.

Therefore, voting in these elections is not just a right and obligation, but a crucial act of responsibility for everyone invested in upholding equality and ensuring the effectiveness of our institutions in the future.



Zsuzsanna Szelényi
Program Director, CEU Democracy Institute and Author of *Tainted Democracy, Viktor Orbán and the Subversion of Hungary*

Just weeks before the European elections, there is a strong 'wind of change'. Anti-establishment political parties are on the rise all over Europe, many representing far right ideas. Some of these parties are new and less articulate, while others are building on several-years-long political experience to develop well-defined strategies.

Elections, including European elections, are the field of democratic political competition. They revolve around power and they are always about ideas. Anyone thinking European politics can be technocratic is missing the point. The 2008 economic crisis – which proved to be a cathartic moment in retrospect – opened the door to an idea that the European (Western) liberal democratic status quo is on the decline. Since then, illiberal practices and even autocratic efforts have surfaced in Europe.

In Hungary, the autocratic transformation took shape in a radical way. Viktor Orbán used a single victory to accumulate lasting power, presenting illiberalism as a radical alternative to the European liberal status quo. Orbán's unscrupulous politics and influence in Europe

arises from the fact that he does not need to worry about losing elections. The success of his autocracy serves as a tempting model for radical right-wing parties, making the sweep of the radical right the greatest challenge ahead of the European elections.

By 2024, radical right parties reached a point where they had systematically coordinated and established institutions to spread illiberal narratives. Illiberal conservatism, civilisationist ethnocentrism (nativism), and paternalist populism form the modules of this ambiguous, yet coherent [illiberal ideology](#), adaptable to different political contexts.

Moderate politics cannot prevail if it remains defensive. Europe needs a compelling, innovative and alternative vision to the idea of 'fortress Europe' which is not appropriate to serve our continent as a space for stability and progress in a fast-changing reality. The future of Europe, however, must be more just in terms of sharing the burdens of change across countries and social groups.

The **European Policy Centre** is an independent, not-for-profit think tank dedicated to fostering European integration through analysis and debate, supporting and challenging European decision-makers at all levels to make informed decisions based on sound evidence and analysis, and providing a platform for engaging partners, stakeholders and citizens in EU policymaking and in the debate about the future of Europe.

The **European Politics and Institutions** programme covers the EU's institutional architecture, governance and policymaking to ensure that it can move forward and respond to the challenges of the 21st century democratically and effectively. It also monitors and analyses political developments at the EU level and in the member states, discussing the key questions of how to involve European citizens in the discussions over the Union's future and how to win their support for European integration. The programme has a special focus on enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans, questions of EU institutional reform and illiberal trends in European democracies.

With the strategic
support of



King Baudouin
Foundation

Working together for a better society



Co-funded by
the European Union