



America-Eurasia Center America-Europe Program

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The Inevitable European Union



The European Union Parliament Logo Image Credit: EU

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<https://www.eurasiacenter.org/>

The Inevitable European Union: Assessing how the EU is likely here to stay and its future.



European Parliament Photo Credit AFP F Florin

Over 50 countries are set to hold elections this year, testing the strength of democratic institutions worldwide.¹ In Europe, the citizens of 27 countries will have the opportunity to vote for representatives in the European Parliament in June. Ever since its official creation in 1993, public perception of the European Union (EU) has varied, with certain parties framing themselves as pro or anti-EU. Euroscepticism, which broadly describes those who oppose integration in favor of increased sovereignty, has increased in popularity during the last decade.² Its manifestations vary from soft-Euroscepticism—where MEP's may take issue with very specific policies—to hard-Euroscepticism, in which representatives hold the view that their nation should completely exit the project.

In 2016, Eurosceptics made themselves heard by voting to leave the Union with a referendum called Brexit, marking the first time in EU history where a constituent nation has left the union. For the first time since its founding, the gradual dismantling of the EU appeared to be a genuine possibility in the near future. However, Brexit proved to be a watershed moment for Euroscepticism as the UK's arduous exit from the Union and its subsequent troubles highlighted the unique benefits of EU membership. Without the economic benefits provided by the EU, investment and employment in Britain stalled and there are fewer workers as a

¹ <https://apnews.com/article/global-elections-2024-preview-cb77b0940964c5c95a9affc8ebb6f0b7>

² <https://www.populismstudies.org/Vocabulary/euroscepticism/>

result of Brexit.³ Thus, leaving the European Union entirely proved to be an unattractive prospect for European voters.

Eurosceptics in a Post-Brexit World

The EU has seemingly been able to weather the Brexit storm. In fact, according to data from the Pew Research Center, most people, particularly those who live in EU states, have a positive view of the EU.⁴ Regardless, Eurosceptic parties are expected to perform well in this year's election. The parliament's far-right party, Identity and Democracy (ID), is projected to become the third largest party, while the pro-European parties - the European Peoples Party (EPP), The Progressive Alliance of Socialists & Democrats (S&D), and Renew Europe (ALDE) - are expected to shrink.⁵ The immigration crisis and talks of EU climate regulations have fanned the flames of anti-EU sentiment.⁶ This forecast is consistent with developments in European domestic politics, as far-right nationalist parties exceed expectations in the polls and secure surprise victories in elections. In Germany, the far-right Eurosceptic Alternative for Germany (AfD) hit an all-time high in the polls in December of last year,⁷ while Eurosceptic parties remain in power in Italy, Finland, Hungary, and the Netherlands.



Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and EU President Ursula Der Leyen, Photo Credit: The EU Dispatch

³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-64450882>

⁴ <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/10/24/people-broadly-view-the-eu-favorably-both-in-member-states-and-elsewhere/>

⁵ <https://www.ft.com/content/5f40ed06-9051-4b3d-a6fb-740f932a6ea1>

⁶ <https://www.ft.com/content/16f30328-8031-4486-b0bf-2a934e6e8b1b>

⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/germanys-afd-hits-record-high-poll-after-budget-chaos-2023-12-19>

Contrary to the expectation that national right-wing parties would advocate for their countries to follow in the footsteps of the UK, they are not pursuing this course of action. Instead, these parties are shifting focus towards reforming and exerting influence from within the EU itself. For instance, the Finns Party, a far-right group which constitutes the second largest governing party, has postponed its aspiration to leave the Union, since general approval among the Finnish populace of the EU's actions in supporting Ukraine have boosted the EU's popularity in Finland.⁸

Under the stewardship of Geert Wilders, the Dutch right-wing hard-Eurosceptic Party for Freedom (PVV) won in a landslide victory in parliamentary elections, leading to a PVV majority in parliament. The party's success was cause for concern for many in Brussels, however, contrary to fears, no steps have been taken to pull the Netherlands out of the EU by the PVV. Wilders, in fact, subsequently stated that if EU regulation isn't to their liking, "we can always change it to make it better."⁹

Nowhere has this change been more notable than in Italy. Last year, the Brothers of Italy party (FdI) rose to power on a wave of anti-EU sentiment, however, it subsequently embraced a more cooperative stance with the European Union upon taking power. President of the EU Commission von der Leyen herself stated in January that "our cooperation (with Prime Minister Meloni) has been excellent."¹⁰ These switch ups have not gone unnoticed; Thierry Breton, the EU Internal Market Commissioner, has highlighted that even the more extreme parties walk back their anti-EU rhetoric.¹¹ Ultimately, the economic benefits and sense of European unity that come with staying in the EU outweigh the calls for sovereignty.

The Union and its Future

While these developments indicate that the Union is likely here to stay, it is important to assess what a Eurosceptic takeover of the parliament would entail. What we can expect is to see a battle for the state of the EU, with those trying to strip it of its powers clashing with those who see it existing in its current state. Calls for increased sovereignty constitute the main talking points of Eurosceptics; if in power, their agenda has potential to severely weaken the EU's institutions. To counter this, pro-EU parties must focus on confronting the polycrisis and undertake a "branding" campaign. With EU approval still high in most parts of Europe, leaders must continue to highlight the tangible, yet understated benefits of the EU. These benefits include improved European identity building, comprehensive rights protecting workers in the EU, and a firm posturing by the EU regarding the war in Ukraine which has helped Europeans unite behind a common cause and

⁸ <https://www.politico.eu/article/finland-far-right-finnns-eu-exit-demand/>

⁹ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/11/28/geert-wilders-netherlands-europe-eu/>

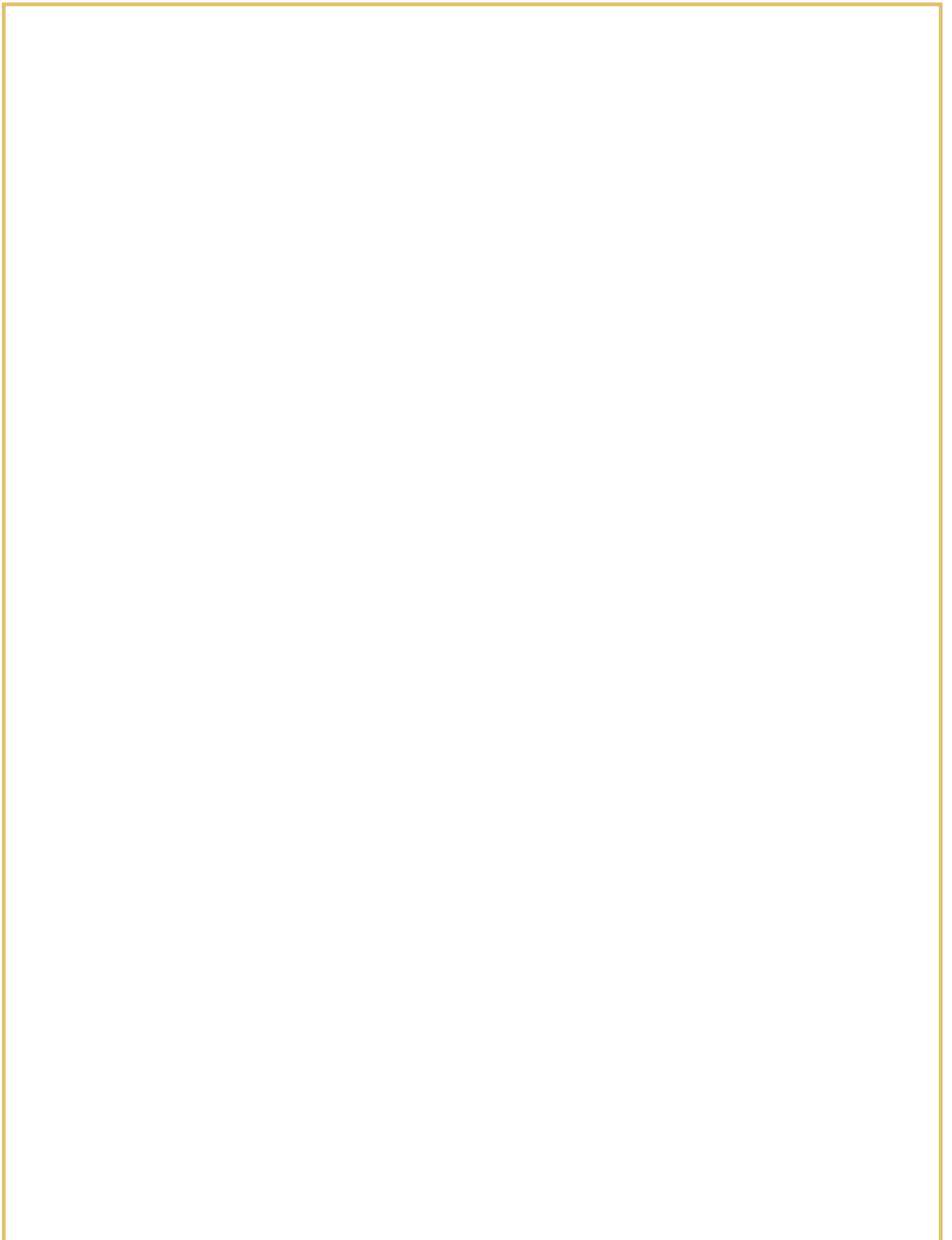
¹⁰ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_24_264

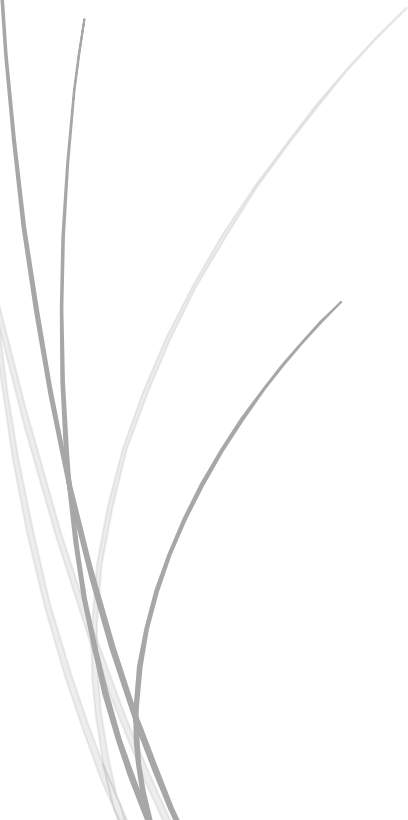
¹¹ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/elections/news/eus-breton-downplays-euroscepticism-but-warns-against-left-right-extremes/>

distinguish themselves vis-à-vis Russia.¹² In highlighting the EU's advantages, its prestige can be restored after the blows it has endured at the hands of populist movements.

While recent steps taken by Eurosceptic parties give the impression that the EU, as a supranational entity, is here to stay and that they're ready to work within it, one must be wary of their ideological background. These parties are founded on a nationalistic and sovereigntist bedrock that often clashes with the principles of the EU. It is important for pro-EU parties to understand this fact when collaborating with such parties. If they exert significant control over the EU parliament, they could ultimately choose to strip the EU of most of its essential powers or outright pull their countries out from the EU. As a result, it would be unwise for one to accept the recent embracement of EU membership by Eurosceptic parties as a signal of true cooperation; given the opportunity, Eurosceptic parties still have the ability to render the Union useless.

¹² https://european-union.europa.eu/priorities-and-actions/eu-priorities/achievements_en#:~:text=The%20EU's%20main%20economic%20engine,retire%20in%20any%20EU%20country.





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