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BLOG
— POST

What's happening in the European Parliament?



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The political upheaval in France caused by the first instance conviction of Marine le Pen and her co-defendants did indeed originate in the European Parliament, and the situation of MEPs' parliamentary assistants.

Some French politicians and even some journalists point out that, after all, parliamentary assistants are there to “play politics” with their MPs, who employ them according to their own priorities.

This ignores the specific nature of the organisation of assistants at the European Parliament.

Since a 2009 Council Regulation, there have been two categories of assistants: “accredited parliamentary assistants”, who are paid directly by the EP services for tasks specifically related to the MEP's European activity, and whose budget may not be used for other purposes, and “local assistants”, who generally work in the MEP's constituency and have an employment contract in accordance with national law.

The Paris Criminal Court's decision at first instance concerns only the first category of accredited assistants, whose remuneration by the EP, and therefore the EU budget, was allegedly misappropriated for partisan purposes and with full knowledge of the facts by RN MEPs.

This point remains largely absent from the media. With that in mind, let's return to the subject of our columns: What has become of the European Parliament since its election in June 2024?

I • A new European Parliament since June 2024

It is worth pointing out here that this Parliament is very different from its predecessors. The political balance of power has shifted, the atmosphere has changed, and so has the international context. But isn't the Parliament, elected by proportional representation, a reflection of the political trends at work in the Member States?

Following the elections, the European People's Party (EPP - centre-right) group came out on top, increasing the number of its MEPs (from 176 in the previous mandate to 188 today), followed by the S&D group (Socialists and Social Democrats), which fell slightly (139 to 136). The Renew (Centre) group has suffered a major setback (102 to 75) and has been relegated to fifth place.

The alliance of interests between Victor Orban's Fidesz party, which was expelled from the EPP, and the Rassemblement National, which wanted to distance itself from the German far-right AFD, has led to the formation of a new group, the Patriots for Europe (PFE). It becomes the third political force in the new parliament with 86 MEPs, followed by the Conservatives and Reformists group (ECR 80 MEPs), dominated by Giorgia Meloni's party, which takes fourth place. The AFD and the Polish PIS, along with a few others, have joined forces in the Europe of Sovereign Nations group (ENS 25 MEPs).

In other words, the EPP group becomes the pivotal group in the Assembly, while all the groups on the right (EPP, PFE, ENS, ECR) together hold an absolute majority. Conversely, the "progressive" majority of yesteryear, which came close to an absolute majority (S&D, Renew, Greens, Left), no longer exists.

II • New alliances and a shift to the right

It is still too early to assess the first months of the legislature. The whole of the second half of 2024 was taken up with preparations for the new Commission, which took office in December (election of the President in July, presentation of the College of Commissioners in September, hearings of the Commissioners-designate and election of the College in November). However, the process of the hearings quickly demonstrated the influence of the EPP in their organisation. It succeeded in imposing the hearings of the Vice-Presidents in the final phase, in order to weaken the future Vice-President-designate from the ranks of the left, Teresa Ribera (S&D), but also to secure Vice-President Fitto from the ranks of the ECR group. Political games have clearly prevailed over other considerations, even if the process of confirmation hearings remains an unprecedented exercise in transparency with regard to the personalities who will be in charge of the European executive.

It is also questionable whether such a long timeframe is appropriate for setting up the main European institutions at a time when time is speeding up everywhere in the world. Without undermining the democratic process, a tighter timetable could be envisaged in the future.

Moreover, according to all observers, the atmosphere in the European Parliament has changed in recent months. The EPP is in a position of strength, it can choose its alliances, which leads to unpredictability, frustration for some, and sometimes conflict. Not to mention the inevitable internal divisions within each of the groups, most often linked, as usual, to national considerations.

The new order of political groups also has consequences for the organisation of work: definition of the agenda for plenary sessions, order of speaking in plenary, in parliamentary committees and at the Conference of Group Chairs. However, the traditional “cordon sanitaire” continues to apply to the far right, except for the ECR group (which was already the case under the previous legislature), which now has two Vice-Presidents on the EP Bureau and a Quaestor. The President of the European Parliament Roberta Metsola was elected in 2024 with 562 votes out of 705, including the votes of the ECR group.

It is true that the President of the Commission was elected by a “pro-European” majority comprising the EPP, S&D, Renew and Green groups (401 votes in favour out of 705 in July). The College of Commissioners was elected by 370 votes in December (the Green group did not join the majority on this occasion).

The legislative priorities were established jointly by these groups and the President. The latter had set red lines in its relations with the far right, expressed in the phrase “pro-Ukraine, pro-Europe, pro-rule of law”.

This majority should remain solid on the essentials, especially in view of the geopolitical and economic situation, which presents Europe and the European Union with major challenges.

Basically, the EU’s priorities have changed radically since the last legislature, which was largely dominated by the Green Deal.

Today, the key words are security and competitiveness.

The EU as such has little competence in security and defence matters, and debates and decisions are largely taken outside the EU, which has significant but marginal legislative and budgetary levers.

This situation should not overshadow all the other issues, particularly those addressed in the reports by Mario Draghi and Enrico Letta. Many of these have been and will be examined by the EP, on the basis of proposals from the Commission: migration (return directive), “omnibus” packages to reduce regulation, sustainable development, innovation and research, and, of course, the major debate on the financial perspectives that will begin in the second half of the year.

One of the first was the adoption of a “Venezuela” resolution, recognising the legitimacy of Mr Gonzales as President of Venezuela, voted by the EPP, the Patriots and ECR, followed by the vote on an AFD amendment by the same parties, calling for the construction of walls to stop migrants and set up deportation camps outside the EU.

The current debate on the LIFE programme, for example, a flagship environmental programme with a budget of over €5 billion for the period 2021-2027, including €15 million for NGOs, is revealing: the Environment Committee came within one vote of adopting a motion to reject the LIFE work programme. By this yardstick, the integrity of the Green Deal is not assured.

Another example: while MEPs adopted their position on the Parliament’s estimates of expenditure and revenue for 2026 on 3 April, an amendment to set up an ethics committee to strengthen the fight against corruption, tabled by the S&D, Renew and Greens groups, was rejected by the EPP, ECR, Patriots and ENS MEPs (298 votes against, 283 in favour and 12 abstentions).

On the other hand, the vote on 3 April on two dossiers in the “Omnibus” package demonstrated a strong desire for cooperation between the main groups: after intense negotiations, the four European majority groups agreed to reach a compromise on the “stop the clock” proposal to amend the dates of application of the directive on corporate sustainability reports and the directive on due diligence in relation to corporate sustainability.

Another test will take place shortly on the EDIP regulation on the financing of European defence industries, which could give rise to political and national divisions.

In short, there are tensions, particularly in certain parliamentary committees (but not all), a real shift to the right on specific issues with a loss of influence for the former progressive majority, which has to fight tooth and nail to find compromises, but also a shared desire among the groups of the pro-European majority to close ranks in the face of external challenges.

Votes will continue to be taken on a case-by-case basis, with divisions that may be tactical, doctrinal or national.

III • Future prospects and challenges

The future behaviour of the EPP group and family remains, on the whole, uncertain: certain internal currents remain very unfavourable to alliances with the far right, as in the Polish case or when the EPP prevented some of its members from aligning themselves with the far right to add amendments to the 2026 budget on migration and Gaza. The future coalition in Germany because it brings together the CDU and the SPD may also change the strategy of the German delegation of the EPP. The CDU is no longer in opposition in its own country and may wish to exert a different influence in the European Parliament. What about the influence of the powerful trio of Weber, the President of the EPP group in Parliament, Merz, the new German Chancellor, and Von der Leyen, the President of the Commission, on the Commission’s agenda?

Far-right groups are also experiencing internal divisions, particularly over Ukraine, Russia and Trump's United States. And the elections in some European countries are shaping up to be strategic (Poland in May, for example).

The issue of the future financial perspectives will be central in the coming months, with the Parliament likely to oppose the Commission's attempts to renationalise many European programmes. The four groups in the European Parliament already agreed on 10 April on compromise amendments calling for a "significant increase" in the multi-annual budget, while opposing the recasting of the budget that the Commission apparently wants. The plenary vote will take place on 7 May, ahead of the Commission proposal due in July.

All these issues will be examined in greater depth by our EP Policy Observatory between now and the summer. We will then have the benefit of a year's hindsight.

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