

Policy Brief:
**Prospects for changes in the composition
of the European institutions after
the 2024 elections**

Tomasz Zając

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INTRODUCTION

As the 2024 elections for the EP approach, the question of who would be in charge of the European institutions becomes more and more discussed in the media and among political leaders. This paper describes how the political situation in the EP changed since 2019, analyses the perspective for changes of its composition in the next term, and looks into the possible reconfiguration of the top jobs position, but also into a broader geographical (im)balance regarding employment in EU institutions.

This policy brief is based on interviews conducted in Brussels, Belgium between the 4 and the 8 of September 2023. 11 interviewees participated in the research, including officials from the European Commission (EC), the European Parliament (EP), analysts from various think tanks, an assistant to a Member of the European Parliament (MEP) and an MEP. The discussion focused on the prospects for changes in composition of the European institutions after the 2024 elections. To ensure honesty and openness during the interviews, the Chatham House rule was applied, hence, the identity of the interviewees is not revealed. Combining expert interviews with media sources and think-tank analyses, allowed for method triangulation and enriched the paper by providing a more in-depth discussion of the described matters.

THE POLITICAL SITUATION IN THE EP DURING ITS 9th TERM

From 1979, when the first elections by universal suffrage to the EP took place, the European People's Party (EPP) and Party of European Socialists¹ (PES) were the two biggest parties holding the absolute majority in the EP. This changed for the first time in 2019, with 9th term of the Parliament. The historic duopoly has ended and to construct a majority supporting the European Commission a third party - liberal Renew - was needed. Over the entire 9th term, the internal configuration of the EP political parties changed (some MEPs left certain parties and joined the others), as did their polling.

The term started with the following seats configuration²: EPP – 187 seats, PES - 146, Renew (RE) – 98, Identity and Democracy (ID) – 76, Greens – 68, European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) – 62, the Left – 39, unaffiliated - 29³. The biggest changes in the

¹ It has been operating under this name since 1992, before it was functioning as Confederation of Socialist Parties.

² The results show the distribution of the seats at the beginning of 2020, as in 2019 the Great Britain has not yet left the EU (it happened only a year after) and the overall number of MEPs was then 751 (including 73 MEPs from UK), whereas in 2020 the number of the MEPs decreased to 705.

³ G. Sabbati, *Members of the European Parliament from February 2020*, 15 September 2020, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2020/646202/EPRS_ATA\(2020\)646202_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2020/646202/EPRS_ATA(2020)646202_EN.pdf).

composition concerned the two biggest parties. In 2021, the EPP lost its 12 MEPs from the Hungarian Fidesz who left it to avoid being expelled from the party⁴. The PES in turn, lost its three members in 2022 due to the Qatargate (two were expelled, one resigned)⁵ and two MEPs from Slovakian Smer have left the party in 2023 to avoid being suspended⁶. These are mostly permanent changes, as it is highly unlikely that after the 2024 EP elections Fidesz will be readmitted to the EPP (such an action would undermine EPP's credibility, as there was no significant change in the discourse or actions of the Hungarian party). 17 MEPs altogether might seem as not a very significant number, but it is worth recalling that Ursula von der Leyen was elected as President of the EC with only 9 votes over the 50% threshold⁷. However, the whole College of Commissioners received much more secure majority (by 87 votes⁸), therefore too far-reaching conclusions (that for instance the whole von der Leyen's Commission barely received a majority) should not be drawn from this either.

The change in political support in different Member States (MS) adds complexity to the internal changes in the political landscape. The polls (see below) show that the situation from 2019, when EPP and PES had to find a third party to have a majority, will most likely repeat itself after the 2024 elections. The change in the support for parties is summarised in the Table 1 - due to the decision of the Council in 2023, the number of seats will change to 720 in 2024, therefore, to facilitate the comparison of support within a party and between them, a percentage of their shares in the seats is given.

⁴ V. Jóźwiak, M. Szczepanik, *Fidesz Breaks Up with the European People's Party*, 5 March 2021, https://pism.pl/publications/Fidesz_Breaks_Up_with_the_European_Peoples_Party.

⁵ V. Lamquin, *Corruption au Parlement européen: Marc Tarabella exclu par les socialistes belges et européens*, 18 January 2023, <https://www.lesoir.be/489691/article/2023-01-18/corruption-au-parlement-europeen-marc-tarabella-exclu-par-les-socialistes-belges>.

⁶ J. Hanke Vela, *Brussels Playbook*, 18 October 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/newsletter/brussels-playbook/biden-heads-to-israel-as-tensions-mount-over-hospital-blast/>.

⁷ *Parliament elects Ursula von der Leyen as first female Commission President*, 16 July 2019, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20190711IPR56824/parliament-elects-ursula-von-der-leyen-as-first-female-commission-president>.

⁸ *Parliament elects the von der Leyen Commission*, 27 November 2019, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20191121IPR67111/parliament-elects-the-von-der-leyen-commission>.

Table 1. Number of MEPs in the European Parliament

	2020 ⁹	2023 ¹⁰	% of all seats	2023 (Europe Elects projection) ¹¹	% of all seats	2023 (Politico projection) ¹²	% of all seats
EPP	187	178	25.3	175	24.3 (- 1.0)	168	23.3 (- 2.0)
PES	146	141	20.0	142	19.7 (- 0.3)	141	19.6 (- 0.4)
RE	98	101	14.4	89	12.4 (- 2.0)	83	11.5 (- 2.9)
ID	76	60	8.5	87	12.1 (+ 3.6)	85	11.8 (+ 3.3)
Greens	68	70	10.0	51	7.1 (- 2.9)	46	6.4 (- 3.6)
ECR	62	67	9.5	83	11.5 (+ 2.0)	78	10.8 (+ 1.3)
Left	39	37	5.3	37	5.1 (- 0.2)	33	4.6 (- 0.7)
Unaffiliated	29	49	7.0	56	7.8 (+ 0.8)	86	11.9 (+ 4.9)

The projections made by both Politico and Europe Elects rely mainly on national polls and national elections results, therefore one should be aware that their prognostic value is limited, as the elections to the EP have their own specificity. Nevertheless, they are some of the few reliable point of reference in this matter.

The changes in political support are not very large and, because of this, most probably the same trio (EPP, PES and Renew) will constitute a majority after the 2024 elections. However, as illustrated in Table 1, a certain trend is visible – the support for the actual majority for the EC (liberal centre-left) decreased. The main forces benefiting from this decline are the right and the far right, as their support has grown. Also, the current polls (from December 2023) do not show the whole picture, as during the last year the level of support for the EPP was worse than the one presented in the table. According to Politico’s projection, during 2023, the estimated number of seats for the EPP was rather between 160-165.

PROSPECTS FOR CHANGES IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

The background described in the previous section triggered actions from the EPP chief – Manfred Weber, who attempted to reposition the party from centre-right towards more

⁹ G. Sabbati, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ Political groups: size, composition by country and national political party of their MEPs, December 2023, <https://facts-and-figures.europarl.europa.eu/snapshot/term-9/current#Political-groups-size-composition-by-country-and-national-political-party-of-their-MEPs>, there are currently 703 MEPs.

¹¹ M. Garscha, *EU Parliamentary Projection: Record High for ID*, 30 November 2023, <https://europeelects.eu/2023/11/30/november-2023/>.

¹² EU Parliament elections projection – Poll of Polls, 8 December 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/european-parliament-election/>.

right-wing stance. This is manifested in his statements, where for instance he supported financing border barriers in the MS from the EU budget¹³ (which went against the President of the EC). Additionally, the EPP tries to present itself as not very radical in terms of the flagship legislation regarding the climate change (Green Deal) - the EPP members almost voted down¹⁴ the Nature Restoration Regulation¹⁵. Another issue that suggests there may be attempts towards repositioning of the party is its presumed willingness to cooperate with the ECR. The Brothers of Italy MEP Nicola Procaccini claimed that Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni met with Weber at the beginning of 2023 to talk about the possibility of a cooperation between the EPP and Meloni's European Conservatives and Reformists¹⁶.

This last issue gained a lot of resonance, both in media and among politicians. The collaboration between parties belonging to the EPP and ECR in national governments is not new - an example of this can be the Italian government, composed of EPP, ECR and even ID. Even at the European level some kind of partnership can be witnessed, like in the case of Czech EPP and ECR parties, which decided to issue a joint election list for the EP elections¹⁷. However, this kind of potentially systemic cooperation within the EP has not been seen and would make a precedence. As explained below, this is unlikely to occur, and this view was shared by most of my interlocutors.

Firstly, according to the actual polls there is still clear majority for the current trio, therefore there is no need to search for a new ally by any of them. Additionally, PES and Renew already ruled out the possibility to cooperate with the ECR in the next term¹⁸.

Secondly, the attempt to collaborate with the ECR was initiated by Manfred Weber and although he is a prominent figure in the EPP, this approach was met with a backlash from

¹³ G. Sorgi, *EU lawmakers break ranks to endorse controversial funding for border protection*, 19 April 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/parliament-votes-down-budget-report-mep-back-eu-fund-border-protection/>.

¹⁴ L. Guillot, B. Brzeziński, *EPP pitches itself as farmers' party ahead of 2024 European election*, 4 May 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/european-peoples-party-farmer-rural-interest-2024-european-election/>.

¹⁵ Legislative Observatory of the European Parliament, *Nature restoration*, [https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?reference=2022/0195\(COD\)&l=en](https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?reference=2022/0195(COD)&l=en)

¹⁶ N. Vinocur, *Brussels Playbook*, 6 January 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/newsletter/brussels-playbook/swedish-migration-push-tanks-for-ukraine-when-manfred-met-georgia/>.

¹⁷ A. Zachová, S. Michalopoulos, *Czech EPP, ECR parties form joint EU elections list*, 30 October 2023, euractiv.com/section/elections/news/czech-epp-ecr-parties-form-joint-eu-elections-list/.

¹⁸ Hanke Vela J., *Brussels Playbook*, 2 March 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/newsletter/brussels-playbook/garcia-vs-weber-charles-michels-pricey-trips-putins-propaganda-hit/>, Castaldi R., *EU liberals seek to drag EPP away from Meloni's 'extreme right'*, 13 June 2023, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/eu-liberals-seek-to-drag-epp-away-from-melonis-extreme-right/>.

members of the parties. The Bavarian members ruled out such a possibility¹⁹, as did the Polish members of the Civic Platform belonging to the EPP²⁰.

Thirdly, the cooperation with the ECR would mean cooperation with parties such as Vox, which are considered far-right. This, in turn, would mean breaking the so-called *cordon sanitaire* (fire wall) - a principle present in the political culture of - for instance - France and Germany, according to which political parties considered to be extreme should not be legitimised by allowing them to co-govern. To allow this kind of “coalition” would mean setting a precedence that would contribute to normalise such radical parties. In addition, this would become a point of reference for the MS, namely that even at the EU level, governing with such parties is allowed.

In addition to the above arguments, some of my interlocutors pointed out to the fact that in their opinion this approach is not effective. The reasoning behind such repositioning is often interpreted as a desire to take over by the centre-right party of the electorate of the radical parties. Two of my interlocutors from think tanks stated that it would not make sense for a voter to choose EPP, while he or she can vote for “the original”. In addition, according to another of my interlocutors, the shift to the right would rather weaken the EPP, making it less pro-integration.

THE COMPOSITION OF THE EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS AFTER THE 2024 ELECTIONS

The approaching elections started speculations regarding the most important EU positions (*top jobs*). According to one of my interlocutors from public administration sector claiming to have knowledge from her inner circle, Ursula von der Leyen would run depending on the polls results. If the three parties forming the current majority had again a clear majority in the next term (so as to be able to vote the motion of censure for the future Commission), she would declare herself a candidate, if not, she would be waiting until the last possible moment to gain more certainty in this regard.

Even if it is too soon to speculate about the possible candidates for the top jobs, the personal reshuffles at the top of the EU institutions, it is a good moment to reflect on a broader rules governing the composition of these bodies. There is an indirect link

¹⁹ O. Noyan, *Bavarian conservatives rule out coalition with Italy's Salvini, Meloni*, 5 May 2023, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/bavarian-conservatives-rule-out-coalition-with-italys-salvini-meloni/>.

²⁰ M. Roszak, *Meloni flirtuje z euroludowcami. Rozmowy z Weberem zaskoczeniem dla PiS*, <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/swiat/artykuly/8630151,unia-europejska-meloni-wspolpraca-epl-ekr-pis-weber.html>.

between the EP elections and the high-level positions in the EU institutions (which, in turn, translate into lower positions), but most of them are filled regardless of political cycles. This is why the new term of the EP can be a good opportunity to try to implement a more systemic approach regarding the employment policy in the institutions, especially as regards the geographical balance.

Article 27 of the Staff Regulations stipulates that “Recruitment shall be directed to securing for the institution the services of officials of the highest standard of ability, efficiency and integrity, recruited on the broadest possible geographical basis from among nationals of Member States of the Union. No posts shall be reserved for nationals of any specific Member State”²¹. However, in reality this rule is not fully implemented. In this section I will only focus on the EC problems with the geographical imbalance, but this issue concerns also the other EU institutions.

As assessed by the EU institutions themselves: “a deterioration can be noticed (...) e.g. an increase in the number of Member States with presence of their nationals below 80 % of the guiding rate [in entry-level positions] (...) in the European Commission from 10 in 2017 to 15 by 31 December 2022)”²². To the lesser extent, but nevertheless, this applies to the mid and high-level positions.

During the interviews with the representatives of the EU institutions and of MS underrepresented in them, although differences occurred, both parties agreed that one of the main issues causing this underrepresentation is the fact that there are too few candidates from these 15 countries. As for what is causing this, the explanations varied.

The MS representatives argued that the European career path might not be very well known or attractive for the citizens of a given MS, but also that the candidates for the positions in the EU institutions are aware of the fact that most of the high-level position are occupied by the people from the overrepresented countries and that they tend to hire people of the same nationality and therefore not compete for this positions. Additionally, they claimed that the EC could allow some special tools to help tackle the geographical imbalance, for instance, by introducing national competitions.

²¹ Regulation No 31 (EEC) laying down the Staff Regulations of Officials and the Conditions of Employment of Other Servants of the European Economic Community, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A01962R0031-20220101>.

²² Geographical balance of staff in EU institutions, bodies and agencies, a discussion note from the Council of the European Union meeting on 2 June 2023.

The EC in turn, argued that the process is merit-based and that trying to implement special measures might result in the competition being legally contested before the court. The interviewee from the EC claimed that the main issue is with the MS and their actions to increase the number of candidates for the positions in the EU institutions.

CONCLUSION

The EPP, PES, and Renew are the three strongest political parties which will most probably have a majority to vote on a motion of censure for the next European Commission. However, the political position of these parties weakened during the present term. The EPP has fewer MEPs in its ranks and the actual polls show that it will have even fewer MEPs than it currently has. Public support for PES and Renew also weakened.

Although this situation is to some extent worse for the ruling trio than it was at the beginning of the 9th term, it does not mean it creates a vacuum for the ECR to fulfil. Even if Weber tried to start some type of cooperation with ECR, most likely this will not materialize, as there is a strong internal opposition for such a move from, among other, German and Polish MEPs. Additionally, this would be hard to accept for the MEPs from countries like France and Germany, due to the violation of *cordon sanitaire*. Finally, the expected benefits (to attract voters from the far-right) are questionable.

The approaching elections will result in personal reshuffles, which can be a good opportunity to rethink how the geographical balance is achieved in the EU institutions and introduce a fairer rule, reflecting better geographical balance.

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