



Parties Joust on Security Ahead of the European Parliament Elections

Jolanta Szymańska

Despite the rise of Eurosceptic forces in some Member States, a month before the elections to the European Parliament, polls give the informal coalition of the Christian Democrats, Social Democrats and Liberals a comfortable majority in the chamber (more than 400 out of 720 seats). Although the parties have nominated candidates for the post of president of the future European Commission (EC), and the Christian Democrats are clearly at the forefront of popularity polls, in the face of the lack of consensus among the Member States around a leading candidates system (*Spitzenkandidaten*) it is uncertain whether their candidate will ultimately hold this position.

Latest Polls. According to Europe Elects polls published at the beginning of May, the centre-right European People's Party (EPP) remains in the lead and can count on 183 seats in the future European Parliament (EP). In recent months, the party has seen an increase in support, leading the polls in many Member States, among others in Germany, Poland, Spain, Romania, Greece, and Finland. The centre-left group the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (SD) is in second place with a probable stable result of 140 seats (support for the party has been fluctuating between 135 and 144 seats for a year). The centre-liberal Renew Europe (RE) group (86 seats in the EP), the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR; 86), and the far-right Identity and Democracy (ID; 84) are fighting for third place. ID recorded a slight rebound after poll declines in March. The left-wing parties are currently the weakest in the polls—the Greens/European Free Alliance (G/EFA) have 48 seats, while GUE/NGL (LEFT) has 44. In recent months, both parties have recorded declines of several mandates.

Campaign Topics. Although the election campaign issues vary from country to country, they are dominated by security, related primarily to the need for a stronger EU response to Russia's ongoing aggression against Ukraine, including strengthening investment in Europe's defence capabilities. In the face of protests by European farmers, the issue of climate transformation also appears in the

campaign, and in connection with the finalisation of work on the migration package, also the EU's response to the challenges of migration. Left-wing groups are trying to shift the emphasis of the campaign to social issues, in particular the rising cost of living or housing problems, as well as the need to put a dam around the nationalist-populist right.

At the EPP congress in Bucharest in March, the need for further EU solidarity with Ukraine and strengthening the EU's defence industry was emphasised. In May, at the European Economic Congress in Katowice, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk proposed to allocate at least €100 billion from the EU budget to defence. The party's pre-election manifesto included a proposal to create a single defence market, develop PESCO projects, and create the position of Commissioner for Defence. In the longer term, the party calls for the creation of a European Defence Union comprising European land, sea, cyber, and air forces. The issue of enhanced cooperation in the area of security is also addressed by other parties. The postulate of strengthening defence cooperation in the EU was a key point of the speech on the future of Europe, delivered in April this year at the Sorbonne by French President Emmanuel Macron, whose party cooperates in the EP with liberal groups (as part of the Renew Europe faction). Macron sees the need for so-called defence bonds, which would involve a common European debt issuance to cover military spending. Socialists are

cautious about this idea. In their election manifesto, they only point to the need for targeted and smarter spending, joint procurement of defence products, closer intelligence cooperation, and further cooperation on cybersecurity and critical infrastructure protection. The ECR identifies the strengthening of the European defence industry, cooperation between the EU and NATO, and investment in technology and security as priorities.

Criticism of the European Green Deal is central to the right's campaign. Extreme Identity and Democracy calls it a misguided and ideological policy of Brussels bureaucrats. In its election manifesto, the ECR announces that the deal will be replaced by a "more balanced and localised climate strategy that (...) prioritises socio-economic wellbeing, and ceases to neglect the concerns of farmers, breeders and fishermen, citizens, and businesses". The EC's climate policy is defended by its president, although there is no shortage of critical voices within her own party. Under the influence of the farmers' protests and political pressure within the EPP, in March this year the EC presented a review of some provisions of the Common Agricultural Policy related to conditionality and strategic plans, aimed at reducing the administrative burden on farmers. However, this did not significantly calm the public mood. The Green Deal is defended—despite the drops in the polls—by the left and the Greens, who emphasise the importance of this project for Europe's economic development and improving the quality of life of citizens.

Due to the differences in national interests, the issue of the migration pact is less prominent in the campaigns of European political parties. Traditionally, right-wing groups have emphasised border protection and cooperation with third countries to return migrants. The Left and the Greens, on the other hand, criticise the overly restrictive assumptions of the border procedure, which is part of the migration pact, putting particular attention on human rights issues.

Leading Candidates. Although the leaders of the Member States have not committed to delegate to the political parties the decision on the appointment of the President of the European Commission (through the use of the *Spitzenkandidaten* system), traditionally before the European elections, the pro-integration parties have decided to appoint their leading candidates for this position. The EPP's nomination at the congress in Bucharest was received by the current head of the European Commission,

Ursula von der Leyen. The EPP candidate's position is so strong that, unlike in the campaign before the 2019 elections, the other centrist parties have not decided to nominate people who are widely recognised in the EU or have a real chance of threatening it. The Socialist candidate is the Luxembourg politician Nicolas Schmit, who currently holds the position of Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights, and the leading candidate of the Liberals is a member of the Bundestag, Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann. Smaller parties also nominated their candidates—the representative of the left is the Austrian politician Walter Baier, and the Greens are represented by two MEPs, Bas Eickhout from the Netherlands and Terry Reintke from Germany. The conservatives from the ECR and the right-wing Identity and Democracy, which reject the system of leading candidates, did not indicate their candidates for the position of the head of the EC.

Conclusions and Perspectives. The development of the election campaign favours the Christian Democrats, who in recent months have strengthened in pre-election polls and have a real chance of winning the EP elections in June. Despite the EPP's clear lead in the polls and von der Leyen's strong personal involvement in the campaign, the final appointment to the position of EC president will be determined by negotiations between the heads of state and government, taking into account the results of the EP elections and other factors, such as the need to maintain geographical balance when filling the top positions in the EU. Von der Leyen's competitors for this position are not so much the leading candidates of other parties, but politicians from her own camp. Von der Leyen's opponents include Romanian President Klaus Iohannis, Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, and former Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi.

The challenge for the new president will be to translate social and political expectations and election promises into the actions of the future Commission. Under the current treaties, the possibilities for financing defence from the EU budget remain limited (R&D projects and capability development under the European Defence Fund; industrial issues require the consent of Member States), the implementation of the recently adopted migration pact is called into question in the face of the reluctance of some Member States towards its key assumptions, and the directions of the climate transition are increasingly dividing different groups of voters in the EU.