



| Brief |

EU Parliamentary Elections Present Cyber and Physical Threats

B-2024-06-05a

Classification: TLP:CLEAR

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June 5, 2024

Scope Note

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Brief | EU Parliamentary Elections Present Cyber and Physical Threats

Executive Summary

The European Union (EU) will hold a transnational parliamentary election from June 6–9, with results expected by the end of the last day of voting. The EU parliament writes legislation and oversees the bloc's annual budget, which totaled EUR 185.6 billion in 2023.¹ It also approves candidates for some of the top positions within the wider EU bureaucracy, such as President of the European Commission. Due to sluggish post-pandemic economic growth and concerns over security, Eurosceptic parties (those opposed to increasing the powers of the EU) are expected to make significant electoral gains. At the same time, the main center-right alliance is very likely to win the largest number of seats and maintain its historical dominance of parliament. In the cyber realm, the EU election represents a key target for state-backed threat actors, particularly Russian-linked groups. The campaign season has already been impacted by several online influence campaigns, and there could be digital disruptions on the days of voting. In terms of physical security, there is a low risk that the election will be the target of an organized terrorist operation. Instead, attacks by lone actors constitute the main threat.

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[hXXps://www.pubaffairsbruxelles\[.\]eu/eu-institution-news/eu-budget-2023-empowering-europe-to-continue-shaping-a-changing-world/](https://www.pubaffairsbruxelles[.]eu/eu-institution-news/eu-budget-2023-empowering-europe-to-continue-shaping-a-changing-world/)

Background

EU citizens select their Members of European Parliament (MEPs) every five years, and the last European-wide election took place in May 2019. This year, all 720 seats in Parliament are on the ballot (up from 705 currently due to an increase in population). There are an estimated 400 million eligible voters across the 27 countries of the EU, making this one of the largest elections to take place in 2024.² According to recent polling data, 71 percent of Europeans say that they are likely to vote this month—10 percentage points higher than in 2019.³

- The election will take place over the course of four days. Voting will begin on Thursday, June 6 in the Netherlands, followed by Ireland and Malta the next day and then Latvia and Slovakia on Saturday. The majority of EU member states will vote on Sunday, June 9. The complicated, multi-stage election process could see issues related to physical security and election interference remain relevant throughout the voting period.
- In most EU countries, the standard voting age is 18. In Germany, Austria, Belgium, and Malta the voting age is 16, and it is 17 in Greece. Several EU member states practice compulsory voting: specifically, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, and Luxembourg.⁴

The number of MEPs that can be elected from each country is determined by population size. The minimum number of representatives that an EU member state can elect is six, and the maximum number is 96.⁵

- | | | | |
|---------------|---------------|----------------|---------------|
| • Germany: 96 | • Belgium: 22 | • Bulgaria: 17 | • Latvia: 9 |
| • France: 81 | • Czechia: 21 | • Denmark: 15 | • Slovenia: 9 |
| • Italy: 76 | • Greece: 21 | • Finland: 15 | • Estonia: 7 |
| • Spain: 61 | • Hungary: 21 | • Slovakia: 15 | • Cyprus: 6 |

² [hXXps://www.bbc\[.\]com/news/world-europe-68899405](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68899405)

³ [hXXps://www.politico\[.\]eu/article/how-to-win-the-european-election/](https://www.politico.eu/article/how-to-win-the-european-election/)

⁴ [hXXps://www.bbc\[.\]com/news/world-europe-68899405](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68899405)

⁵ [hXXps://elections.europa\[.\]eu/en/how-elections-work/](https://elections.europa.eu/en/how-elections-work/)

- Poland: 53
- Portugal: 21
- Ireland: 14
- Luxembourg: 6
- Romania: 33
- Sweden: 21
- Croatia: 12
- Malta: 6
- Netherlands: 31
- Austria: 20
- Lithuania: 11

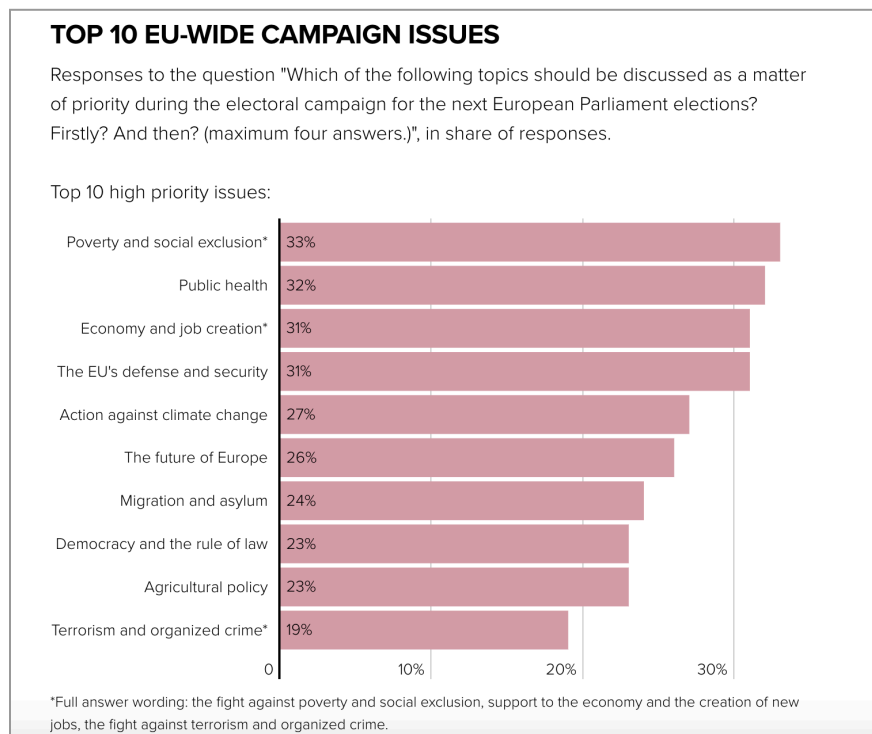
The Parliament includes dozens of parties, with both national and European focuses, but most belong to one of seven coalitions. Each coalition can nominate a “Spitzenkandidat”, or lead candidate, for the position of President of the European Commission. The coalitions span the political spectrum and include parties that are strongly pro-EU as well as those which are highly Eurosceptic. However, it is important to note that the latter no longer pose the existential threat to the survival of the EU that they seemingly did just a few years ago. After Brexit in 2016, most Eurosceptic parties in other countries largely shelved their once-ambitious plans to push for a similar withdrawal from the EU. Instead, they have largely shifted to efforts to weaken the union, asserting the precedence of national interests over EU policies and regulations. Overall, the seven main alliances within the EU parliament are as follows:

- The European People’s Party Group (EPP) currently holds the largest number of seats in Parliament and has won every election since 1999. It is a center-right group and controls many significant positions within the EU bureaucracy. For instance, Roberta Metsola, a Maltese MEP, serves as the President of the EU Parliament, and the EPP Spitzenkandidat Ursula von der Leyen is currently President of the European Commission.
- The center-left Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) dates back to 1953. Some prominent member parties within this coalition include Spain’s Socialist Party (PSOE), Germany’s Social Democratic Party (SPD), and Italy’s Democratic Party (PD). Iratxe García from Spain is S&D’s president, and Luxembourg MEP Nicolas Schmit, current EU Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights, has been selected as S&D’s lead candidate.
- Renew Europe (RE) serves as the umbrella group for liberal parties from across the bloc. It is one of the most pro-EU coalitions in Parliament and currently controls 102 seats. Valérie Hayer, a French MEP from Emmanuel Macron’s Renaissance Party, serves as both chair and Spitzenkandidat for RE.

The EPP, S&D, and RE operated as an informal coalition in the outgoing Parliament, authoring most of the legislation that came out of that body. This included the EU Green Deal, a complex web of dozens of pieces of legislation based on making the EU climate neutral by 2050. They also led the way on economic policy during the pandemic and EU support for Ukraine. However, the policies have been widely blamed for encouraging immigration and raising the cost of living, which opposition blocs have used to campaign this cycle.

- The Greens is a big tent alliance that incorporates most environmentalist and animal-rights parties. It is broadly considered pro-EU and has helped push forward important renewable energy legislation such as the European Green Deal but generally accuses the informal EPP, S&D, and RE coalition of not going far enough on environmental issues. The two largest parties within this alliance are Germany's Greens and France's Les Écologistes.
- In contrast, one of the most Eurosceptic groups is the Identity and Democracy (ID) coalition. It is composed of MEPs that broadly share a nationalist, populist, and anti-immigrant platform. Some prominent member parties include the French National Rally Party, led by Marine Le Pen; Geert Wilders's Dutch Party for Freedom; and Italy's League Party, headed by Matteo Salvini. This grouping is expected to make the most gains in the new election.
- The European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) is an alliance of Eurosceptic parties. It includes Poland's Law and Justice party, the Brothers of Italy, and Spain's Vox. Its relative strength declined in 2016 after Brexit and the subsequent loss of MEPs from the British Conservative Party. While ECR shares many policy positions with ID and could buttress support for its positions in Parliament, the two alliances have not been able to form a coalition.
- However, Eurosceptic forces also exist on the other end of the political spectrum, most notably in the form of "The Left", an alliance of Socialist and Communist parties. Its most prominent members are La France Insoumise and Germany's Die Linke.

According to the latest Eurobarometer polls, four main issues concern EU citizens the most: poverty and social exclusion, public health, economy and job creation, and defense and security.⁶



Top EU-wide campaign issues

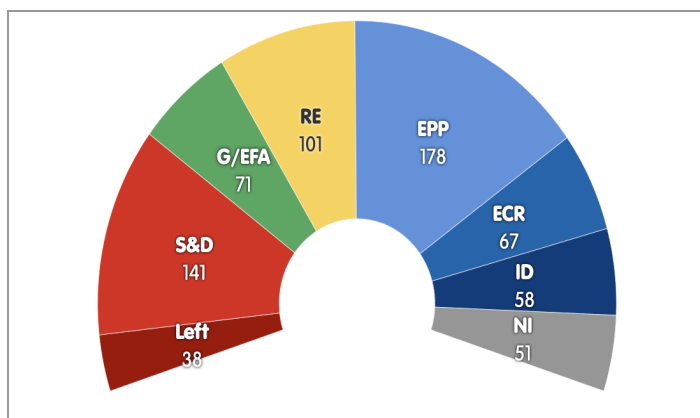
Source: <https://www.politico.eu/article/how-to-win-the-european-election/>

Persistent voter pessimism regarding the ability of the supranational organization to effectively resolve these issues will likely result in dwindling support for liberal, center-left, and environmentalist alliances, coupled with electoral gains for Eurosceptic parties (see next section). However, the center-right EPP is nevertheless expected to maintain its historic dominance and win the largest number of seats.⁷

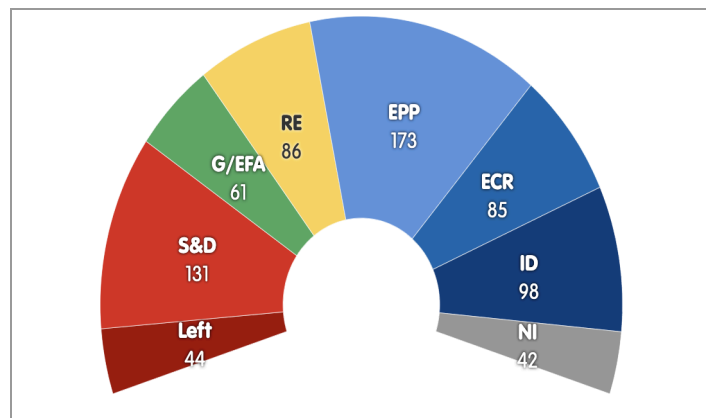
- The diluted influence of the more traditional parties and gains for the right leaning parties will likely stall legislation related to the Green Deal and any other pieces of legislation blamed for raising the cost of living.

⁶ <https://www.politico.eu/article/how-to-win-the-european-election/>

⁷ <https://www.economist.com/interactive/eu-elections-2024-polls-parliament#guides>



Current EU Parliament



Projected 2024

Source:

<https://ecfr.eu/publication/a-sharp-right-turn-a-forecast-for-the-2024-european-parliament-elections/>

Rise of the Far Right

The EU parliamentary elections will take place against the backdrop of complicated geopolitical and economic trends. In the East, the war between Ukraine and Russia recently entered its third year, with no resolution in sight. At the same time, the Israel-Hamas conflict has been raging for the last six months and appears similarly intractable.

- In both cases, the ongoing bloodshed has the potential to have a spillover effect on the EU in the form of disrupted supply chains, hybrid warfare incidents by Russian intelligence services, and an increased threat of Islamist terrorism.

From an economic standpoint, the bloc has experienced sluggish growth in the years following the Coronavirus pandemic, coupled with persistently high inflation triggered by Russia's war in Ukraine.

- The continuing cost-of-living crisis coupled with allegedly burdensome EU regulations prompted widespread strikes and protests by workers and farmers across the continent during the first half of 2024.

In general, these largely negative trends have translated into voter pessimism over the ability of traditionally dominant EU parties to address the needs of ordinary citizens, particularly with regards to issues such as the rising cost of living or common defense against external threats. As a consequence, far-right and Eurosceptic parties, led by the ID alliance, are likely to make electoral gains in a number of key EU countries.

- In France, widespread discontent over the status quo has been further aggravated by a number of domestic factors, particularly the government's controversial and unpopular pension reform. According to the latest polls, an estimated 33 percent of likely voters plan to cast their ballot for Marine Le Pen's National Rally.⁸ In contrast, President Emmanuel Macron's coalition, Ensemble, is polling at around 15–18 percent, with all other major parties trailing further behind.⁹
- Similarly, in Austria, the Freedom Party (FPÖ) has consistently polled at around 30 percent, buoyed by voter anxiety concerning the war in Ukraine and migration levels, as well as residual discontent over the government's COVID-era policies.¹⁰ This puts FPÖ comfortably ahead of its two main competitors, the center-left Social Democratic Party (SPO) and center-right People's Party (ÖVP), which are polling at 22 and 21 percent, respectively.¹¹
- Support for Eurosceptic parties has also surged in Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Finland. Altogether, they currently stand to win three in every 10 votes cast in the upcoming EU parliamentary elections.¹²

Consequently, the ID and ECR coalitions are both expected to increase their share of seats in the new parliament. However, hard-right parties have not enjoyed universal success across Europe. They have also suffered some notable reversals, most recently in Germany. As in other European countries, support for the Alternative for Germany (AfD)

⁸ [hXXps://www.economist\[.\]com/europe/2024/05/22/le-pens-hard-right-looks-set-to-crush-macrons-centrists](https://www.economist.com/europe/2024/05/22/le-pens-hard-right-looks-set-to-crush-macrons-centrists)

⁹ [hXXps://www.lemonde\[.\]fr/en/politics/article/2024/03/11/european-elections-poll-far-right-13-points-ahead-of-macron-s-camp-gap-widening_6606410_5.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/politics/article/2024/03/11/european-elections-poll-far-right-13-points-ahead-of-macron-s-camp-gap-widening_6606410_5.html)

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[hXXps://www.politico\[.\]eu/article/austria-sleepwalking-far-right-victory-european-election-freedom-party-fpo-nazis-herbert-kickl/](https://www.politico.eu/article/austria-sleepwalking-far-right-victory-european-election-freedom-party-fpo-nazis-herbert-kickl/)

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[hXXps://www.france24\[.\]com/en/europe/20240429-in-austria-the-far-right-leads-the-race-for-european-parliamentary-elections](https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20240429-in-austria-the-far-right-leads-the-race-for-european-parliamentary-elections)

¹² [hXXps://www.bbc\[.\]com/news/articles/cgllgxlg5dgo](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cgllgxlg5dgo)

appeared to be surging at the start of 2024. Since then, however, a series of scandals and investigations has substantially dented its popularity.

- In late March 2024, the news media reported that Petr Bystron, a leading AfD member, was being investigated by the German police for allegedly accepting a EUR 20,000 bribe from a Russian agent as part of a Kremlin influence operation.¹³
- Next, on April 23, 2024, authorities in Dresden arrested Jian Guo, a top aide to AfD Spitzenkandidat Maximilian Krah, on suspicion of espionage on behalf of China.¹⁴
- Lastly, on May 18, 2024, Mr. Krah made controversial remarks about the Nazi-era paramilitary group Schutzstaffel (SS) during an interview with the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*.¹⁵ This prompted AfD's subsequent expulsion from the ID coalition.¹⁶ Overall, the party's support in Germany has fallen from 23 percent in December 2024 to around 16 percent currently.¹⁷

Cyber

Given the political and economic significance of the EU, the parliamentary elections for this supranational organization will very likely be a key target for politically-motivated, state-backed threat actors. In addition, this unique democratic contest is arguably more susceptible and vulnerable to attacks than a standard election in a single country.

Over the course of four days, hundreds of millions of eligible voters will cast their ballots in 27 EU member states, each of which has its own distinct election procedures, infrastructure, and safeguards. A successful disruption of the voting process in a single country could potentially cast doubt on the legitimacy of the entire newly-elected parliament. Overall, according to a report published by the EU Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA), the upcoming parliamentary elections face a range of risks, both during the campaign season and on the day(s) of voting.¹⁸

¹³ [hXXps://www.bbc\[.\]com/news/articles/cd13114xwkqo](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cd13114xwkqo)

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[hXXps://www.generalbundesanwalt\[.\]de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/DE/2024/Pressemitteilung-vom-23-04-2024.html](https://www.generalbundesanwalt.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/DE/2024/Pressemitteilung-vom-23-04-2024.html)

¹⁵ [hXXps://www.cnn\[.\]com/2024/05/26/europe/germany-afd-elections-analysis-intl/index.html](https://www.cnn.com/2024/05/26/europe/germany-afd-elections-analysis-intl/index.html)

¹⁶ [hXXps://www.bbc\[.\]com/news/articles/cgllgxlg5dgo](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cgllgxlg5dgo)

¹⁷ [hXXps://www.economist\[.\]com/europe/2024/05/02/espionage-scandals-are-hurting-germanys-far-right](https://www.economist.com/europe/2024/05/02/espionage-scandals-are-hurting-germanys-far-right)

¹⁸ [hXXps://www.enisa.europa\[.\]eu/news/safeguarding-eu-elections-amidst-cybersecurity-challenges](https://www.enisa.europa.eu/news/safeguarding-eu-elections-amidst-cybersecurity-challenges)

- In the runup to the election, likely threats include social engineering operations on social media and other platforms to sway public opinion regarding particular candidates, parties, or issues; data leaks of internal documents, correspondence, and other sensitive information belonging to current or prospective MEPs; cyberattacks that disrupt transmission of political debates at the EU or national level; and identity fraud during voter registration or leaks of voter databases.
- On the day(s) of the election, hackers may attempt to launch disruptive cyberattacks against voting systems. In addition, threat actors could also seek to compromise the vote-counting process by cutting off access to digital records or posting inaccurate results on official sites.

Misinformation will very likely be an important component of efforts to influence the upcoming election. Below is an image (not AI-generated) that began circulating on X (formerly known as Twitter) at the end of 2023. It purportedly depicts Ursula von der Leyen's grandmother meeting Adolf Hitler with the caption, "My Sweet Granny Didn't Wash Her Hand for a Month after This Precious Occasion." While the photo itself is authentic, the family connection is completely invented.

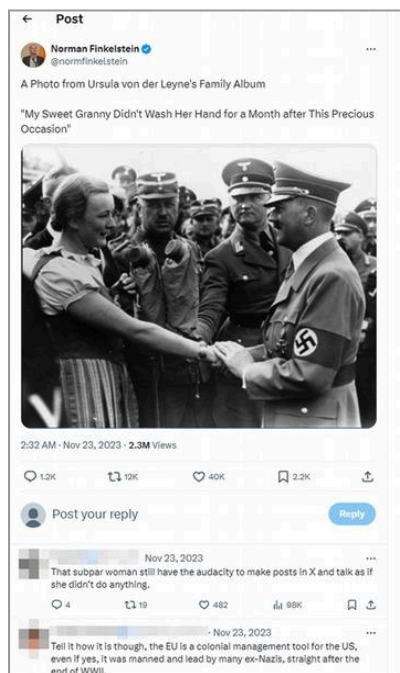


Photo of a woman wrongly labeled as the European Commission President's grandmother shaking hands with Hitler
(Source: ZeroFox Collections)

The continued improvement of generative artificial intelligence (AI) technology has also allowed for increasingly sophisticated manipulation of audio and video content known as deepfakes. Deepfakes have already been used to manipulate public opinion and sway elections in several EU member states since the fall of 2023.

- On August 24, 2023, Poland's Civic Platform (PO) coalition broadcast a controversial campaign ad targeting the governing Law and Justice (PiS) party. It featured a collection of audio clips that mixed together genuine recordings of speeches by then-Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki with fake ones generated by AI. After considerable criticism, PO's social media team issued a follow-up statement admitting that some of the audio content in this political ad had been fabricated.¹⁹
- Then on September 28, 2023, a fake audio recording featuring Michal Šimečka, chairman of the liberal Progressive Slovakia party, and Monika Tódová, a well-known independent journalist, was posted on Facebook and other social media sites. In it, the two are heard discussing efforts to rig the upcoming parliamentary election by bribing members of Slovakia's Roma minority.²⁰ The forged recording was posted just two days before voting began. While it is not possible to gauge its direct impact, the audio clearly aimed to discredit a prominent pro-EU politician who is in favor of continued aid to Ukraine, leading to suspicions of Russian involvement.
- Next on December 31, 2023, Loïc Signor, spokesperson for France's Renaissance Party, published a deep fake video of far-right leader Marine Le Pen giving a sinister New Year's greeting in Russian accompanied by the tag "#MarinePoutine."²¹ According to its creators, this content was intended to criticize Le Pen's alleged Kremlin connections, as well as highlight the dangers of generative AI technology.
- Lastly, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni is scheduled to testify on July 2, 2024, in a civil trial against two men accused of creating and posting pornographic deep fake videos featuring her likeness in 2020.²² The EU does not currently have

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[hXXps://notesfrompoland\[.\]com/2023/08/25/opposition-criticised-for-using-ai-generated-deepfake-voice-of-pm-in-polish-election-ad/](https://notesfrompoland[.]com/2023/08/25/opposition-criticised-for-using-ai-generated-deepfake-voice-of-pm-in-polish-election-ad/)

²⁰ [hXXps://www.wired\[.\]com/story/slovakias-election-deepfakes-show-ai-is-a-danger-to-democracy/](https://www.wired[.]com/story/slovakias-election-deepfakes-show-ai-is-a-danger-to-democracy/)

²¹ [hXXps://www.politico\[.\]eu/article/france-gouvernement-deepfake-marine-le-pen/](https://www.politico[.]eu/article/france-gouvernement-deepfake-marine-le-pen/)

²² [hXXps://www.cnn\[.\]com/2024/03/22/europe/giorgia-meloni-italy-deepfake-porn-intl/index.html](https://www.cnn[.]com/2024/03/22/europe/giorgia-meloni-italy-deepfake-porn-intl/index.html)

legislation that prohibits this practice, forcing victims to attempt redress through a variety of national-level privacy or defamation laws. To combat this rising problem, the EU Commission introduced a bill criminalizing non-consensual sexually explicit deep fake images on February 6, 2024. However, even if it is approved, this legislation would not take effect until 2027.²³ Consequently, the upcoming parliamentary elections could witness the weaponization of deep fake pornographic content to target politicians.

The EU has taken some steps to combat the use of deep fakes during the campaign season. On April 9, 2024, a majority of parties involved in the upcoming election signed a collective charter on fair practices, which included a promise to refrain from making and distributing unlabeled deep fakes aimed at discrediting their political opponents.

- However, the far-right ID group did not officially sign the charter, instead voicing general agreement with its principles; of note, this pledge is voluntary and legally non-binding. Moreover, it does not protect against the use of deep fake audio and video by external threat actors.²⁴

| Russian Election Interference

The most significant digital threats to the EU parliamentary elections will likely come from cyber espionage units affiliated with Russian intelligence agencies and pro-Kremlin hacktivist groups. These tampering efforts will likely take the form of social engineering operations during the campaign season and possible disruptions on the days of voting. For the Kremlin, the upcoming vote represents a key opportunity to promote prospective MEPs sympathetic to its interests, undermine those who favor stronger support for the Kiev government, and generally encourage anti-Ukraine sentiments within EU countries. Past experience indicates that the Putin regime already has considerable election interference capabilities.

- On May 5, 2017, Russian hackers tried to sway the French presidential election by publishing several gigabytes of data stolen from Emmanuel Macron's campaign

²³ [hXXps://www.politico\[.\]eu/article/europe-eye-fix-taylor-swift-nude-deepfake/](https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-eye-fix-taylor-swift-nude-deepfake/)

²⁴ [hXXps://www.politico\[.\]eu/article/eu-political-parties-promise-to-steer-clear-of-deepfakes-ahead-of-election/](https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-political-parties-promise-to-steer-clear-of-deepfakes-ahead-of-election/)

team. This leak occurred two days prior to the first round of voting and just hours before the electoral silence period. It primarily consisted of real emails between members of the campaign team mixed with forgeries. However, the lack of bombshell revelations coupled with the low quality of the fake documents greatly lessened the impact of this meddling attempt. In addition, frequent warnings in the months prior by the National Commission for the Control of the Electoral Campaign for the Presidential Election (CNCCEP) and National Cybersecurity Agency (ANSSI) arguably increased public awareness of and resistance to such influence operations. Thus, in contrast to the United States the previous year, the attempted interference into France's presidential elections in 2017 is widely regarded as a failure.²⁵

- In 2016, Russian intelligence services conducted a sophisticated, multi-faceted effort to meddle in the U.S. presidential elections. This included hacks of voter registration databases in 21 states, spreading misinformation on social media through troll farms like the St.Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency, targeted release of sensitive information stolen from the Democratic National Committee (DNC), and numerous attempts to establish covert links with the Trump campaign.²⁶ According to subsequent congressional inquiries, the goals of this effort were to harm the Clinton campaign, assist Trump's presidential bid, and generally sow popular distrust of the electoral process.²⁷ The extent to which this effort was successful remains the subject of ongoing investigations and debates.

Thus far, EU security officials have identified two current Russian influence operations specifically targeting the parliamentary elections.

- The first, code named "Doppelganger", has been active since at least May 2022. It seeks to spread disinformation through fake news stories planted on legitimate-looking media sites. The fabricated information is then further disseminated and amplified via social media accounts on several platforms, including Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. The threat actors running this operation utilize advanced obfuscation techniques, including manipulating social media

²⁵ [hXXps://www.csis\[.\]org/analysis/successfully-countering-russian-electoral-interference](https://www.csis.org/analysis/successfully-countering-russian-electoral-interference)

²⁶ [hXXps://time\[.\]com/5565991/russia-influence-2016-election/](https://time[.]com/5565991/russia-influence-2016-election/)

²⁷ [hXXps://www.intelligence.senate\[.\]gov/sites/default/files/documents/report_volume5.pdf](https://www.intelligence.senate[.]gov/sites/default/files/documents/report_volume5.pdf)

thumbnails and employing strategic first and second-stage website redirects to evade detection.²⁸

- More recently, in February 2024, officials from Viginum, a French anti-disinformation agency, announced that they had uncovered a large-scale Russian effort aimed at manipulating public opinion in Western Europe. The influence operation has been code-named “Portal Kombat” and allegedly consists of 193 seemingly independent websites that are covertly run by a single unnamed Russian organization. According to Viginum, this network routinely spreads deceptive or false pro-Kremlin news stories, particularly concerning the ongoing war in Ukraine. In addition, French authorities claim that the operators of Portal Kombat are gearing up to launch a wide-ranging disinformation campaign in the runup to the EU parliamentary elections.²⁹ In both cases, the main objective is to promote right-wing politicians sympathetic to the Russian government, undermine prospective MEPs who might favor stronger sanctions, and generally erode public support for continuing military and financial assistance to Ukraine.

The fact that two operations are taking place concurrently and share broadly similar tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) indicates that perhaps they are being run by rival intelligence agencies such as the Federal Security Service (FSB) and Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR). Also, ongoing Russian efforts to interfere in the EU parliamentary elections extend beyond the digital sphere. Kremlin-linked individuals have also attempted to bribe prospective MEPs, most notably Petr Bystron of the AfD (see section on Rise of the Far Right).

- Since the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, EU countries have experienced a constant barrage of distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks from pro-Kremlin hacktivist groups such as Killnet and NoName.^{30,31} The main targets are websites for public transit, financial institutions, and government agencies. These attacks are typically unsophisticated and cause minimal damage, and in most cases service is restored within a matter of hours. This kind of low-level

²⁸ [hXXps://www.disinfo\[.\]eu/doppelganger-operation/](https://www.disinfo.eu/doppelganger-operation/)

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[hXXps://www.economist\[.\]com/europe/2024/02/12/france-uncovers-a-vast-russian-disinformation-campaign-in-europe](https://www.economist.com/europe/2024/02/12/france-uncovers-a-vast-russian-disinformation-campaign-in-europe)

³⁰ [hXXps://www.politico\[.\]eu/article/meet-killnet-russias-hacking-patriots-plaguing-europe/](https://www.politico.eu/article/meet-killnet-russias-hacking-patriots-plaguing-europe/)

³¹ [hXXps://cybernews\[.\]com/cyber-war/new-undercover-intel-noname-russian-hacktivist-operations/](https://cybernews.com/cyber-war/new-undercover-intel-noname-russian-hacktivist-operations/)

nuisance will likely continue throughout the EU parliamentary election cycle, including on the days of voting. It has the potential to cause the greatest harm to websites based in smaller, less-affluent EU countries, which have a less robust cybersecurity infrastructure than heavyweights such as France or Germany.

- Germany, the EU's largest member, has also blamed Russia for hacking two of its largest parties. One week before the elections, Germany's largest opposition party, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), said it was the victim of a cyberattack. While details of the hack have not been revealed, authorities said it was similar to a 2023 attack on Germany's SPD, a member of the ruling government, which was blamed on Russian-backed groups. The hack reportedly targeted SPD email accounts, as well as German companies in the logistics, defense, aerospace, and IT service sectors.³²

In addition, the EU elections face lower-level threats from Chinese state-backed hacking groups seeking to assist their Russian counterparts.

- In 2022, the PRC declared a "no limits" friendship with the Russian Federation; since then, China has tacitly attempted to support its ally while at the same time avoiding any actions that would trigger serious EU or U.S. sanctions. This includes activities in the digital sphere aimed at discrediting Ukraine or undermining election integrity in Western countries. For instance, in March 2024, UK Deputy Prime Minister Oliver Dowden accused China of conducting cyber campaigns against the UK's Electoral Commission and Members of Parliament (MPs), leading to sanctions against two individuals and a Chinese-linked company.³³
- Meanwhile, the EU's anti-disinformation unit, Stratcom, has identified Beijing and Moscow as key propagators of malicious anti-Ukraine content online.³⁴ Thus far, however, EU security officials have not identified any Chinese-led operations on the level of Doppelganger or Portal Kombat directed against the upcoming parliamentary elections.

The EU has engaged in a concerted effort to counter cyber threats from state-backed threat actors, with the Commission adopting a package of measures

³² [hXXps://www.dw\[.\]com/en/germany-major-hack-targets-center-right-cdu-party/a-69242147](https://www.dw.com/en/germany-major-hack-targets-center-right-cdu-party/a-69242147)

³³ [hXXps://www.bbc\[.\]com/news/live/uk-politics-68654299](https://www.bbc.com/news/live/uk-politics-68654299)

³⁴ [hXXps://www.politico\[.\]eu/article/european-union-china-ukraine-disinformation-cyberattacks-war-russia/](https://www.politico.eu/article/european-union-china-ukraine-disinformation-cyberattacks-war-russia/)

to reinforce democracy and protect the integrity of elections in November 2021.³⁵ The EU has also taken steps to ward off foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) in the context of disinformation narratives, particularly Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.³⁶

- For example, the bloc sanctioned and ultimately banned several Kremlin-sponsored propaganda outlets, such as Sputnik and Russia Today (RT).³⁷ These countermeasures are likely to act as a first-wall defense against foreign cyber threats. However, ZeroFox is unable to assess the overall effectiveness of these preventative actions.

| Terrorism and Insecurity

In the run-up to the elections, numerous security experts warned of the risk of a terror attack on large gatherings in Europe linked to the Israel-Hamas war, as well as longer-term societal fissures around the cost of living and immigration that have worsened in recent years. More recently, security experts have warned that Russia is orchestrating acts of violent sabotage across Europe.

Terrorism

Although Jihadist groups such as the Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda have been weakened in recent years, they remain a threat due to their propaganda capabilities and the radicalizing effect of the Israel-Hamas conflict.

- In the lead up to the 2023 winter holidays, European Home Affairs Commission chief Ylva Johansson said there is a "huge risk" of a terror attack in the EU during the holiday period, warning that groups like Al-Qaeda and IS will use the Israel-Hamas war to increase calls for violence.³⁸

³⁵

[hXXps://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-07/SWD_2022_308_6_EN_document_travail_service_conjoint_part1_v5.pdf](https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-07/SWD_2022_308_6_EN_document_travail_service_conjoint_part1_v5.pdf)

³⁶ [hXXps://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2024/759612/EPRS_ATA\(2024\)759612_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2024/759612/EPRS_ATA(2024)759612_EN.pdf)

³⁷ [hXXps://merlin.obs.coe.int/article/9427](https://merlin.obs.coe.int/article/9427)

³⁸

[hXXps://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/12/05/huge-risk-of-terrorist-attacks-in-the-european-union-home-affairs-chief-warns](https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/12/05/huge-risk-of-terrorist-attacks-in-the-european-union-home-affairs-chief-warns)

- Several countries within the bloc have raised national alert levels and deployed additional security forces following the attack in Moscow carried out by Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) operatives on March 22, 2024.³⁹ The countries that implemented these additional precautions include France, Belgium, Germany, and Italy.⁴⁰ The heightened state of alert will remain in place throughout much of the EU during and after the parliamentary elections due to other important upcoming events, such as the European Football (Soccer) Championship from June 14 to July 14 and the Paris Olympic Games from July 26 to August 14, 2024.

However, a significant terrorist attack during the EU parliamentary elections is unlikely due to safety measures already in place, as well as the established modus operandi of Islamic extremist groups.

- During the past decade, the bloc has improved its ability to combat this threat through enhanced safety measures and improved coordination between national security agencies. In 2021, there were 15 terrorist incidents in member states, leading to the deaths of two EU citizens.⁴¹ By comparison, there were 57 terrorist attempts (which includes successful, failed, or foiled) in 2020, with a total of 21 fatalities.⁴²
- Thanks to coordinated international efforts, Al-Qaeda is believed to be much weaker than it was in the early 2000s and has not had a leader since Ayman al-Zawahiri was killed in 2022.⁴³ Similarly, IS has significantly fewer capabilities than during its heyday from 2014 to 2018, when the group controlled a large territory in Iraq and Syria. Nevertheless, both groups pose a residual threat to Western countries.
- In the past, neither group has ever targeted elections within the EU. Instead, during the 2000s, Al-Qaeda and later IS launched terror attacks against transportation facilities, concert halls, sports venues, and press offices. Given this established

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[hXXps://www.rfi.fr/en/france/20240326-france-deploys-extra-4000-troops-nationwide-over-security-concerns-in-run-up-to-olympics](https://www.rfi.fr/en/france/20240326-france-deploys-extra-4000-troops-nationwide-over-security-concerns-in-run-up-to-olympics)

⁴⁰ [hXXps://www.dw.com/en/germany-to-set-up-border-controls-for-Euro-2024/a-68666553](https://www.dw.com/en/germany-to-set-up-border-controls-for-Euro-2024/a-68666553)

⁴¹ [hXXps://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/eu-response-to-terrorism/](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/eu-response-to-terrorism/)

⁴² [hXXps://www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/en/article/20210628STO07262/terrorism-in-the-eu-terror-attacks-deaths-and-arrests-in-2020](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/en/article/20210628STO07262/terrorism-in-the-eu-terror-attacks-deaths-and-arrests-in-2020)

⁴³ [hXXps://foreignpolicy.com/2023/07/31/al-qaeda-zawahiri-death-strength-decline-terrorism/](https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/07/31/al-qaeda-zawahiri-death-strength-decline-terrorism/)

modus operandi, it is unlikely that Jihadist terrorist groups will undertake a coordinated operation aimed at disrupting the EU parliamentary elections.

It is important to note, however, the continued risk of lone-actor attacks. France and Belgium experienced several such incidents in late 2023, leading to the deaths of three people.⁴⁴⁴⁵⁴⁶ In addition, on November 29, 2023, German police foiled a plot by two teenagers to attack a Christmas market in Leverkusen.⁴⁷ In each case, the individuals involved are believed to have been inspired by IS online propaganda. The dispersed nature of the parliamentary elections will complicate efforts by authorities to fully protect every voting location and electoral office from this potential threat.

Immigration Related Attacks

Immigration continues to be a sensitive and controversial topic throughout the EU, particularly with regards to new arrivals from Africa and the Middle East. Across the continent, widespread fears of demographic and cultural change have not only boosted the popularity of anti-migrant parties but also increased intercommunal tensions, occasionally leading to outbreaks of violence. Throughout the campaign season, there have been several attacks by both pro- and anti-immigration groups.

- On November 18, 2023, a 16-year-old student was stabbed to death in the small town of Crépol, France. Far-right groups blamed Muslim immigrants for the killing and engaged in two nights of rioting.⁴⁸
- A similar event occurred in Dublin, Ireland, shortly thereafter. On November 23, rioters angry over a supposed stabbing carried out by an immigrant attacked police and perpetrated acts of violence with strong xenophobic undertones, despite the lack of evidence that a foreigner had carried out the initial attack.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ [hXXps://edition.cnn\[.\]com/2023/10/13/europe/arras-france-school-knife-attack-intl/index.html](https://edition.cnn.com/2023/10/13/europe/arras-france-school-knife-attack-intl/index.html)

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[hXXps://www.lemonde\[.\]fr/societe/live/2023/12/03/en-direct-attentat-a-paris-le-point-sur-les-dernieres-informations_6203619_3224.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/live/2023/12/03/en-direct-attentat-a-paris-le-point-sur-les-dernieres-informations_6203619_3224.html)

⁴⁶ [hXXps://www.bbc\[.\]com/news/world-europe-67195715](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67195715)

⁴⁷ [hXXps://www.dw\[.\]com/en/germany-teens-allegedly-planned-christmas-market-attack/a-67594953](https://www.dw.com/en/germany-teens-allegedly-planned-christmas-market-attack/a-67594953)

⁴⁸ [hXXps://www.bbc\[.\]com/news/world-europe-67548173](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67548173)

⁴⁹ [hXXps://www.rte\[.\]ie/news/primetime/2023/1207/1420746-how-dublins-riots-developed/](https://www.rte.ie/news/primetime/2023/1207/1420746-how-dublins-riots-developed/)

- Most recently, on June 1, 2024, a police officer was killed and several people were injured during a stabbing attack targeting an anti-Islam rally in the southwestern city of Mannheim, Germany.⁵⁰

Violent incidents of this kind will remain a concern both during and after the elections, especially at public gatherings that specifically focus on immigration issues.

Russian-backed Sabotage

In late May 2024, Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas accused Russia of launching a “shadow war” against Europe related to its financial and military backing of Ukraine.⁵¹ As the conflict enters its third year, Russian threat actors have increasingly engaged in “active measures” as part of a hybrid strategy to intimidate exiled opponents of the Kremlin, destabilize Western countries, and undermine public support for the Ukrainian cause. According to a recent NATO briefing, these efforts have intensified since the start of the new year, with a rash of suspected Russian-linked incidents reported across the EU in April and May 2024.⁵²

- This includes a hammer attack against a prominent member of the Russian opposition living in Vilnius, vandalism of a Holocaust memorial in Paris, and arson of commercial buildings and factories in Germany, Poland, and Lithuania.⁵³⁵⁴⁵⁵⁵⁶ The Russian military intelligence agency (GRU) is likely the main entity engaged in these aggressive acts. Given the recent uptick of incidents and the often-opportunistic choice of targets, it is plausible that voting sites or other facilities connected to the parliamentary elections could also be vulnerable to similar attacks.

⁵⁰ [hXXps://www.dw.com/en/german-police-officer-injured-in-mannheim-knife-attack-dies/a-69246626](https://www.dw.com/en/german-police-officer-injured-in-mannheim-knife-attack-dies/a-69246626)

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[hXXps://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/russia-is-waging-a-shadow-war-on-the-west-that-needs-a-collective-response-estonian-leader-says](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/russia-is-waging-a-shadow-war-on-the-west-that-needs-a-collective-response-estonian-leader-says)

⁵² [hXXps://www.economist.com/europe/2024/05/12/russia-is-ramping-up-sabotage-across-europe](https://www.economist.com/europe/2024/05/12/russia-is-ramping-up-sabotage-across-europe)

⁵³ [hXXps://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68854314](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68854314);

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[hXXps://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/may/22/france-russia-paris-holocaust-memorial-graffiti-red-hand](https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/may/22/france-russia-paris-holocaust-memorial-graffiti-red-hand)

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[hXXps://notesfrompoland.com/2024/05/21/russia-likely-behind-fire-that-destroyed-warsaw-shopping-centre-says-tusk/](https://notesfrompoland.com/2024/05/21/russia-likely-behind-fire-that-destroyed-warsaw-shopping-centre-says-tusk/)

⁵⁶ [hXXps://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/26/us/politics/russia-sabotage-campaign-ukraine.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/26/us/politics/russia-sabotage-campaign-ukraine.html)

| Conclusion

From June 6 to June 9, 2024, hundreds of millions of EU citizens will head to the polls in a historic election that will determine the composition of the bloc's supranational parliament for the next five years. Widespread discontent over ongoing economic malaise and security problems is likely to translate into electoral gains for right-wing Eurosceptic coalitions. This political shift has the potential to impact future EU policies on issues such as immigration, support for Ukraine, and environmental protection. The ongoing confrontation between the EU and the Russian Federation has manifested itself through a series of online influence campaigns and cyberattacks by Kremlin-linked groups. The effectiveness of EU countermeasures and the degree to which these foreign threat actors successfully impact the parliamentary elections remains to be seen.

| Appendix A: Traffic Light Protocol for Information Dissemination

	Red	Amber
WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?	Sources may use TLP:RED when information cannot be effectively acted upon by additional parties and could lead to impacts on a party's privacy, reputation, or operations if misused.	Sources may use TLP:AMBER when information requires support to be effectively acted upon but carries risks to privacy, reputation, or operations if shared outside of the organizations involved.
HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?	Recipients may NOT share TLP:RED with any parties outside of the specific exchange, meeting, or conversation in which it is originally disclosed.	Recipients may ONLY share TLP:AMBER information with members of their own organization and its clients, but only on a need-to-know basis to protect their organization and its clients and prevent further harm. Note that TLP:AMBER+STRICT restricts sharing to the organization only.
	Green	Clear
WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?	Sources may use TLP:GREEN when information is useful for the awareness of all participating organizations, as well as with peers within the broader community or sector.	Sources may use TLP:CLEAR when information carries minimal or no risk of misuse in accordance with applicable rules and procedures for public release.
HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?	Recipients may share TLP:GREEN information with peers and partner organizations within their sector or community but not via publicly accessible channels.	Recipients may share TLP:CLEAR information without restriction, subject to copyright controls.

| Appendix B: ZeroFox Intelligence Probability Scale

All ZeroFox intelligence products leverage probabilistic assessment language in analytic judgments. Qualitative statements used in these judgments refer to associated probability ranges, which state the likelihood of occurrence of an event or development. Ranges are used to avoid a false impression of accuracy. This scale is a standard that aligns with how readers should interpret such terms.

Almost No Chance	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Roughly Even Chance	Likely	Very Likely	Almost Certain
1-5%	5-20%	20-45%	45-55%	55-80%	80-95%	95-99%