



## ÖGfE Policy Brief 11 2024

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# A Call to Counter the Anti-Democratic Surge Following the 2024 European Parliament Elections

## Policy Recommendations

1. Effectively address widespread socio-economic concerns of European citizens.
2. Actively counter anti-democratic narratives to prevent the legitimisation and normalisation of far-right anti-European attitudes.
3. Position yourself not as a defender of the unpopular societal status quo but as a disruptor by developing and communicating a compelling vision for the future.

## Abstract

The 2024 European Parliament elections reflect the ongoing trend of far-right parties gaining ground in elections across Europe. While the anticipated rightward shift did occur, it was less pronounced as many had feared, with traditional pro-European factions maintaining a foothold, losing only a few seats. Nevertheless, the results of the election should not distract from the pressing need to address the persisting structural and societal issues that continue to fuel the support of radical or extreme parties across Europe.

This Policy Brief draws on public opinion data collected by d|part across eight EU member states, highlighting widespread societal pessimism and dissatisfaction with national and EU governance. Economic instability, social disillusionment, and fears of social decline are core drivers of public discontent, creating fertile ground for radical or extreme parties, particularly right-wing populist parties.

The findings indicate that citizens are largely dissatisfied with governmental responses to crises, particularly the cost-of-living crisis. Additionally, anti-democratic sentiments are increasingly normalised, with extremist attitudes gaining traction among various voter segments, undermining core democratic values.

To counter this rising tide, parties committed to liberal democracy and pluralism must articulate a compelling vision that addresses citizens' socio-economic grievances and moves beyond mere opposition to far-right narratives. As public support for the EU remains polarised, developing a forward-looking agenda that resonates with diverse aspirations is essential. By committing to substantive solutions, felt in the everyday lives of citizens and effective leadership, democratic forces can revitalise European values and counter the normalisation of far-right and radical ideologies, ensuring the future of a pluralistic Europe.



# A Call to Counter the Anti-Democratic Surge Following the 2024 European Parliament Elections

The elections in the European Union (EU) of early June 2024 marked the tenth European Parliament (EP). The anticipated shift to the right in the EP did occur, raising concerns about a potential erosion of the traditional coalition of pro-European, democratic factions that have long shaped EU governance. However, the shift was smaller than often feared<sup>1</sup>. In a sense, the frequently used phrase “the centre holds” proved accurate, as the European People’s Party (EPP), Socialists and Democrats (S&D), and Renew Europe together lost only a few seats (2019: 415 of 703; 2024: 401 of 720) (see European Parliament 2024).

At the same time, the newly formed far-right party alliance, Patriots for Europe—founded by Viktor Orbán (Hungarian Civic Alliance, Fidesz), Herbert Kickl (Freedom Party of Austria, FPÖ), and Andrej Babiš (ANO), later joined by Marine Le Pen (Rassemblement National), Matteo Salvini’s Lega, and Geert Wilders’ Party for Freedom—has now become the third-largest party family in the European Parliament, closely followed by the slightly less radical but also EU-sceptical European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR)<sup>2</sup>. In 2019, the liberal Renew Europe was the third-largest group, with the Greens/EFA in fourth; however, they have now fallen to fifth and sixth, respectively. Through this new alliance, the political weight of the European right has increased compared to the previously more fragmented landscape.

## A Call to Action Based on Public Opinion Data

The aim of this Policy Brief is to move beyond the binary question of whether the political centre held or whether there was a surge in right-wing representation in the 2024 EP elections. Instead, it delves into public opinion data collected by the Berlin-based, independent, non-partisan, and non-profit think tank [dlpart](#). This data, gathered in eight EU member states—France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Romania, and Sweden—during April and May 2024, provides a nuanced perspective on the prevailing political attitudes and concerns of European citizens. Detailed information about the research project, including specifics on its methodological approach, can be found on the dedicated [project page](#) of dlpart’s website (Eilers et al., 2024).

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1 However, there were notable country-to-country differences. Austria, like France, Italy, Belgium, and Hungary, saw the far-right make significant gains. In the Netherlands and Poland, far-right parties also experienced success, though not to the extent predicted by opinion polls, which had anticipated even stronger results. For an in-depth analysis of these national variations, see Ivaldi and Zankina (2024).

2 After Germany’s far-right Alternative for Germany party (AfD) was expelled from the pan-European group Identity and Democracy in the European Parliament in May 2024, they established a new far-right political group called Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN). ESN is the smallest party group in the EP, primarily composed of AfD members, with 14 out of its 25 MEPs.



Based on recent public opinion data, this Policy Brief provides evidence of a widespread societal pessimism about future outlooks and dissatisfaction with the status quo both at the aggregate EU level and among its individual member states. In light of economic instability and foreign policy threats, these sentiments demonstrate a challenging environment for parties committed to liberal democracy and pluralism as they strive to recover, sustain, or grow public support. Moreover, the data reveals that the normalisation of far-right and anti-democratic attitudes—values that contradict the principles enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU)—has now extended deeply into the political center. This normalisation contributes to the rising popularity of far-right and extreme parties and highlights the erosion of core democratic values across Europe.

## Economic Instability: The Root of Disillusionment

The findings illustrate a significant level of disillusionment among European citizens with national and EU-level governance, largely stemming from concerns about economic stability, social security, and an increasingly bleak outlook for the future of living standards. This climate of pessimism creates fertile ground for the rise of populist actors and movements, particularly far-right parties, especially among those who fear both personal and societal decline. The analysis thus points to a broad sense of concern across diverse populations and emphasises the profound impact of socio-economic factors on political perspectives, signalling an urgent call for democratic forces to structurally address these underlying social and economic issues.

At the core of public discontent across the EU lies a complex set of economic issues, with the cost-of-living crisis impacting households at all income levels. Findings indicate widespread dissatisfaction not only with national governments' but also with the EU's crisis management, as citizens express a bleak outlook on their future living standards. Economic and social issues dominate public concerns, driving a general disillusionment with the political status quo. Citizens' anxieties revolve around economic instability, rising living costs, unemployment, and deteriorating public services. This material insecurity translates into broader frustration with political leadership, as many Europeans fear a steady decline in their standard of living, particularly in major EU states like France, Germany, and Italy. Notably, 67% of Germans, 69% of French, and 56% of Italians expect the standard of living in their country to worsen somewhat or significantly in the next 3 to 5 years, pointing to a continent-wide pessimism that extends even to those who are relatively financially secure.

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Accordingly, these findings also confirm other research on far-right supporters, who harbour particularly negative outlooks on the future. Disillusioned by what they perceive as repeated failures in crisis management, these voters experience a heightened sense of social and personal decline. Certainly, this shift toward right-wing populism cannot be attributed solely to immediate economic hardships; it also reflects a deeper, more pervasive sense of social instability and political alienation that stems from a perceived lack of convincing political solutions. The findings suggest that simply opposing far-right agendas or defending an unpopular status quo will do little to alleviate these anxieties. For parties upholding the values of liberal democracy and pluralism, it will be insufficient to dismiss the concerns of those drifting toward the far



right; rather, they must acknowledge the complex and deeply rooted fears within this growing segment of the electorate.

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## Citizens' Dissatisfaction with Governments

Across Europe, citizens express significant dissatisfaction with how both national governments and the EU have managed recent crises, from economic challenges to social service deterioration and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Data from France, Germany, and Italy underscores this discontent: 84% of respondents in France, 80% in Italy, and 77% in Germany report dissatisfaction with their national governments' handling of the cost-of-living crisis. Furthermore, approximately two-thirds of respondents in these countries also express dissatisfaction with their government's response to the Russian war in Ukraine.

Additionally, respondents across the surveyed nations perceive negative changes in their local neighbourhoods, particularly regarding public services such as healthcare and environmental quality. Apart from Romania and Poland, roughly 50% of people in the remaining six countries surveyed indicate that healthcare services have deteriorated in the area they live in, either somewhat or significantly. These perceptions of local decline, combined with widespread concerns over economic and social issues, intensify dissatisfaction with the current political landscape. Many citizens report a lack of confidence in their governments' capacity to address both past and ongoing crises and hold little trust in political institutions to provide effective solutions for the future. The growing support for radical and extreme parties, particularly on the far right, is not only linked to their narratives of national or EU decline and accusations of "alienated elites" in "established parties" being unwilling or unable to address pressing issues. It also stems from the experience of disruptive crises and a perceived deterioration in local conditions, which many people feel in their daily lives.

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## The Normalisation of Anti-Democratic Sentiments

Within this societal climate, the study highlights a troubling trend: the increasing normalisation of anti-democratic attitudes and extreme-right positions across European societies. Our research shows that extreme-right attitudes, such as racism, nationalism, and authoritarianism, are not only prevalent among far-right supporters but are also present among supporters of mainstream political parties across Europe. This shift was quantified using an index that measured approval rates for statements reflecting racism, antisemitism, national chauvinism, authoritarianism, and conservative gender norms.



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Country-specific data reveals higher approval rates in Greece, Latvia, Poland, and Romania, while Germany, France, Italy, and Sweden show somewhat lower but still high levels of approval. Notably, across the surveyed countries supporters of far-right parties had the highest approval on a scale from 0 to 1 (0.59), but conservative, liberal, and social democratic party supporters also demonstrated relatively high approval (ranging from 0.42 to 0.47). Green party supporters showed the lowest levels of approval (0.29).<sup>3</sup>

Once limited to fringe groups, these ideologies are now gaining traction within the broader political mainstream, being shared more widely beyond traditional far-right supporters by voters from conservative, liberal, and social democratic backgrounds.

To ensure comparability, the study's statements and questions on right-wing extremist attitudes and anti-democratic sentiments were modelled on reputable existing frameworks, particularly the FES Mitte Study (Zick et al., 2023). The findings suggest that anti-democratic sentiments and far-right attitudes are no longer confined to a small, radicalised segment but have become embedded in mainstream political discourse. This widespread acceptance of extreme right ideas poses a profound threat to the fundamental democratic values of the EU, as it signals a drift away from the principles enshrined in the EU's commitment to democracy and human rights.

## **Public Dissatisfaction with EU Trajectory**

Most citizens are dissatisfied with the current direction of the EU, and opinions on its future are highly polarised. Public perception of the EU itself is split: while some see it as a crucial symbol of unity and diversity, others view it as redundant or even burdensome. Despite less pronounced ambivalence than potentially expected from public discourse, this division remains a key issue.

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The study reveals that a majority of citizens are not supportive of the EU's current trajectory, instead envisioning two divergent paths for the EU's future: one advocating for deeper integration and stronger central authority and another seeking to reduce its influence, with some respondents even favouring an exit from the union. Taking all preferences into account, a majority of Europeans show support for remaining in the EU, though opinions on the level of integration vary widely. About 15% advocate for leaving, while 23% support repatriating powers to member states. Around 16% favour keeping the status quo, and 27% wish to deepen EU integration by expanding its powers. A smaller proportion, 10%, supports a single European government. Meanwhile, 11% of respondents were undecided, reflecting a range of attitudes toward the EU's future direction.

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3 For more details and an explanation of the methodological approach, see the report (Eilers et al. 2024).



***Simply maintaining the current structure misses the mark and will not create a more EU-friendly atmosphere across member states.***

This stark division highlights that it is high time to engage citizens with a renewed, inspiring vision for the EU—one that resonates with the majority and fosters a more positive image of the EU. This new vision should also emphasise the core purpose of the EU, especially regarding peace and security, while underscoring the benefits that membership provides to its citizens. Simply maintaining the current structure misses the mark and will not create a more EU-friendly atmosphere across member states.

## **Austria: Not an Outlier in European Trends**

The results of the parliamentary elections in Austria on 29 September 2024, marked the first time the FPÖ won a national election. Both the election results and post-election surveys from the EP elections in Austria suggest that many of the findings of the study can also be applied to the country. For instance, when asked about the reasons for their vote in the EP election, rising prices and the cost of living ranked first in Austria at 47% (compared to the EU average of 42%). The international situation was cited as the second most important issue in Austria at 40% (EU average 34%), followed by migration and asylum, which came in third at 37% (EU average 28%) (ÖGfE 2024).

## **The Need to Address Public Dissatisfaction**

The study stresses the critical challenges that are to be faced by parties upholding the values of liberal democracy and pluralism across Europe amid a climate marked by pervasive dissatisfaction and rising anti-democratic sentiments. Addressing these issues requires more than mere opposition to radical populist rhetoric; it calls for the proactive development and communication of a positive, hopeful vision for the future grounded in material realities and needs that disrupts the status quo without conceding to extremist viewpoints. If parties committed to liberal democracy and pluralism fail to effectively communicate this vision, they risk ceding ground to radical or extreme parties, particularly on the far right, which can dominate the discourse on change—even when their proposed solutions are impractical or harmful. The urgency for pluralistic democratic forces to present a compelling political offering for the future extends beyond electoral cycles, as a forward-looking perspective is essential for countering right-wing populism and fostering a pluralistic society.

Particularly regarding rising living costs, unemployment, and deteriorating public services, the study also reveals a general alignment of material concerns among EU citizens. These universal anxieties contribute to discontent with existing political systems and reinforce a sense of political alienation. Citizens increasingly report negative changes in their communities, which deepens their dissatisfaction with both national and EU governance. This growing pessimism not only amplifies the appeal of far-right parties but also fosters disengagement among politically unaffiliated individuals, particularly those facing economic hardships.

***This trend poses a serious threat to democratic values and risks embedding extremist ideas within accepted political discourse.***

Alarming, the normalisation of extreme right-wing attitudes and anti-democratic sentiments has become increasingly mainstream, affecting not only far-right supporters but also substantial segments of conservative, liberal, and social demo-



cratic voters. This trend poses a serious threat to democratic values and risks embedding extremist ideas within accepted political discourse. Parties upholding the values of liberal democracy and pluralism cannot afford to ignore this phenomenon; adopting or echoing right-wing rhetoric only further legitimises these views. Political scientists often argue that “democracy erodes from the top”, with leaders being the driving force behind Europe’s crisis of democracy (see Bartels 2023). However, this notion can be reversed: democracy can also be strengthened from the top down. By pairing effective leadership with a compelling, positive, and future-oriented vision as well as a decisive rejection to adopt far-right narratives, democratic values for and within the European Union can be revitalised. Only by doing so can the EU hope to counter the right-wing surge and uphold the pluralistic values on which it was founded while also providing their citizens with a socially, societally, and economically stable future. The stakes are high, and the responsibility rests with all democratic actors committed to the European foundations.

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## About ÖGfE

The Austrian Society for European Politics (Österreichische Gesellschaft für Europapolitik, ÖGfE) is a non-governmental and non-partisan platform mainly constituted by the Austrian Social Partners. We inform about European integration and stand for open dialogue about topical issues of European politics and policies and their relevance for Austria. ÖGfE has a long-standing experience in promoting European debate and acts as a catalyst for disseminating information on European affairs.

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