

8-12 April 2024

## I. Political and Policy Developments

1. Leaked European Council Strategic Agenda focuses on competitiveness and defence
2. Rumours of EPP considering alternatives to von der Leyen
3. EPP and PES take aim at emerging right-wing populists
4. European political parties sign electoral code of conduct
5. Populists score victories in Slovakia and Poland; Irish Prime Minister sworn in; New Eurosceptic party in Sweden

## II. Latest Projections

## III. Key institutional milestones

### I. Political and Policy Developments

#### 1. Leaked European Council Strategic Agenda focuses on competitiveness and defence

A leaked draft of the European Council's Strategic Agenda for 2024-2029 has been circulating in Brussels. The European Council adopts strategic agendas to outline the political priorities of national governments ahead of new EU legislative cycles.

The leak, which is understood to be a first draft prepared by European Council President Charles Michel, puts a strong focus on economic competitiveness and security. The draft identifies the need for a stronger link between "internal and external" policies in order to enhance the EU's political and economic sovereignty, implicitly calling for a more political use of trade and competition policy to advance the EU's interests on the global stage. The document also stresses the need to support European industry in achieving the green and digital transitions. Boosting the EU's defence capabilities is mentioned as another key priority.

Overall the draft confirms that the EU political discourse is increasingly prioritising economic competitiveness over climate and environmental objectives. The strategic agenda is expected to be [finalised](#) over the coming weeks and adopted by Member States in June.

#### 2. Rumours of EPP considering alternatives to von der Leyen

Rumours are swirling in Brussels that senior figures from the European People's Party (EPP) are considering alternative candidates for von der Leyen, should the Commission chief not gather enough support among EU leaders in post-election negotiations. Potential names being floated include Greece's Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, Croatia's Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, and Italy's former Prime Minister Mario Draghi.

In recent weeks, influential figures have added uncertainty about the chances of a second term. French President Emmanuel Macron, who had been instrumental in von der Leyen's appointment in 2019, criticised her decision to run for the EPP rather than remaining above party politics. Spain's Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez expressed dissatisfaction over von der Leyen's handling of the Gaza crisis. Even Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, who is known to have a good working relationship with von der Leyen, expressed caution over her reappointment in recent statements.

von der Leyen continues to experience widespread backlash from the lawsuits targeting her exchanges with the CEO of Pfizer, as well as criticism over the appointment of EPP MEP Markus Pieper as SME envoy. Last week four EU commissioners, including the socialists lead candidate Nicolas Schmit, wrote a letter criticising the appointment. Two of the signatories of the letter, Josep Borrell (associated with the Party of European Socialists) and Thierry Breton (associated with Renew Europe), reportedly spoke out against Pieper's appointment during this week's Commission college meeting. Meanwhile, MEPs voted 382-144 for an amendment urging von der Leyen to re-run the selection process for the SME Envoy. While the vote has no legal effect, it is meaningful from a political perspective as it shows increasing scepticism towards von der Leyen across the political spectrum, just as she launches her election campaign.

### **3. EPP and PES take aim at emerging right-wing populists**

The EPP and the PES are increasingly targeting right-wing parties in their campaign events, as they continue to rise in polling popularity.

Participating in the [50th anniversary of Greece's ruling New Democracy party \(EPP\) event](#) in Athens on 7 April, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, vowed to fight back right-wing populist parties, referring to them as "Putin's friends." von der Leyen focussed her attacks on specific parties such as the AfD in Germany, the Rassemblement National in France, and the Konfederacja in Poland, accusing them of seeking to "trample" EU values and "hijack" the future of the EU. During the event, the EPP lead candidate also reaffirmed her commitment to Europe's social market economy and backed the Green Deal, saying it had turned the fight against climate change into a plan for growth.

Speaking at a [PES event](#) in Budapest on 6 April, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz warned about the consequences of a shift to the right, arguing that far-right politicians seek the destruction of the EU's prosperity and values. During the event, Scholz announced his support for PES lead candidate Nicolas Schmit, stating that the Commissioner for Jobs represented people's aspirations for a more social Europe.

### **4. European political parties sign electoral code of conduct**

On 9 April, 10 European political parties signed a [code of conduct](#) promoting transparent and fair campaigning ahead of the EU elections.

Signatories of the charter include all the main European parties, including the far-right Identity and Democracy Party (ID).

The code of conduct was developed by the European Commission and the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), an intergovernmental organisation involving 35 countries supporting democratic institutions around the world. Under the code, parties pledge not to produce, use or disseminate “any form of deceptive content”, with or without artificial intelligence, in the context of the electoral campaign. The code encourages parties to clearly label content, with techniques such as watermarks and technical fingerprints, in line with the [Digital Services Act](#). Other voluntary commitments include pledges not to use fake accounts, bots or to resort to content inciting violence, including against other candidates.

## **5. Populists score victories in Slovakia and Poland; Irish Prime Minister sworn in; New Eurosceptic party in Sweden**

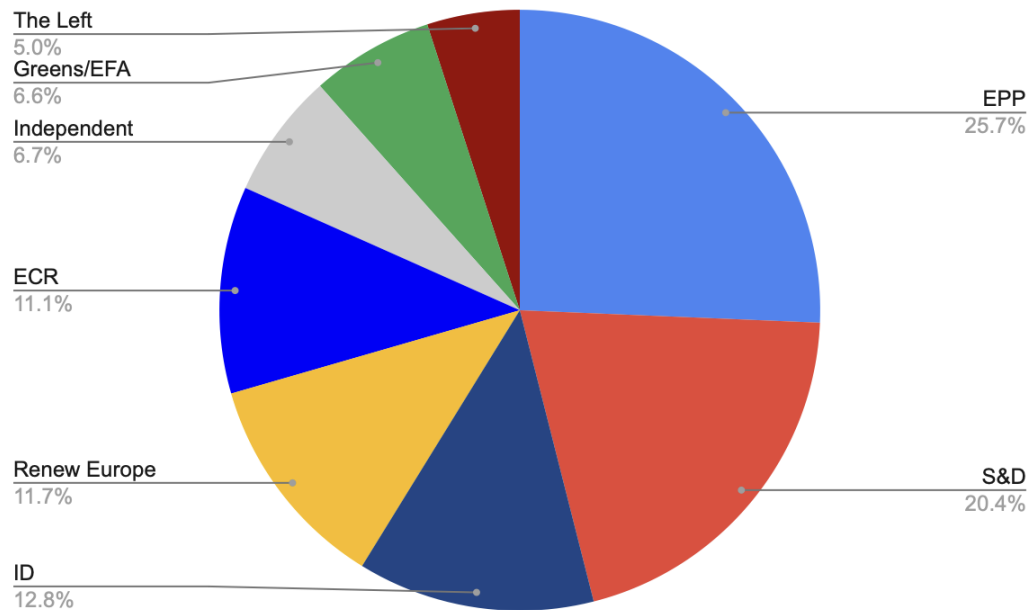
On 6 April, Slovakia elected leftist populist Peter Pellegrini as its new president, succeeding the liberal Zuzana Caputova. A close ally of populist Prime Minister Robert Fico, Pellegrini defeated the pro-Western Ivan Korčok with 53% of the vote. He is set to be sworn in on 15 June. Pellegrini’s appointment is a significant victory for Fico’s coalition: in Slovakia, the president can veto laws or challenge them in the Constitutional Court - powers that Caputova used several times to slow down or block legislations introduced by Fico. With Caputova out, Fico is likely to face little opposition in his plans to diverge from Brussels on issues such as the war in Ukraine and the reform of the country’s judicial system.

On 7 April, Poland’s nationalist-conservative Law and Justice party (PiS) scored a victory in the country’s local government elections. In a setback for centre-right Prime Minister Donald Tusk, PiS won 34.27% of the votes and now control seven out of the 16 regional councils, with significant support across rural regions. These results reveal a loss of momentum from Tusk’s coalition government, and a failure to mobilise voters outside of large cities.

On 9 April, the Irish parliament elected Simon Harris as the youngest-ever Taoiseach, succeeding Leo Varadkar. Harris was confirmed with 88 votes to 69 thanks to the backing of his coalition partners Fianna Fáil and the Green Party, as well as some independent MPs. In his confirmation speech, the new Taoiseach committed to build a new social contract and to address the country’s housing crisis. Harris inherits a coalition agreement that leaves him with little room for major new policy initiatives as a general election is due to be held within the next year.

Swedish EPP MEP Sara Skyttedal and former centre-left MP Jan Emanuel are launching a new party, Folklistan (i.e. “The People’s List”). Folklistan is described as a “collaboration” united by two core proposals: the “abolition” of the right to apply for asylum in the EU and the renegotiation of the terms of Sweden’s EU membership. Folklistan’s list includes politicians from different centrist parties, as well as the Green Party.

## II. Latest Projections



1. **European People's Party (EPP):** 175 seats
2. **Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D):** 139 seats
3. **Identity and Democracy (ID):** 87 seats
4. **Renew Europe:** 80 seats
5. **European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR):** 76 seats
6. **Independent:** 46 seats
7. **Greens– European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA):** 45 seats
8. **The Left (GUE/NGL):** 33 seats

Source: [Politico](#) (5/4/2024).

## III. Key institutional milestones

Date	Event
17 April	ECR election manifesto
22-25 April	European Parliament last plenary session
6-9 June	EU elections
17 June	European Council on 2024-2029 strategic agenda / top jobs appointments
27-28 June	European Council on top jobs appointments
1 July	Beginning of Hungarian Presidency
July	Formation of new European Parliament
16-19 July	European Parliament first plenary session
September	Formation of new European Parliament committees
September	European Commissioner-candidates hearings
October/November	New Commission takes office