

1-5 April 2024

I. Political and Policy Developments

- 1. von der Leyen's second term bid faces growing challenges**
- 2. Rumours of pro-EU coalition agreement for the next term**
- 3. Fears of Russian influence in the EU elections intensify**
- 4. Eurostat releases data on people eligible to vote**
- 5. New Portuguese centre-right government takes office**

II. Latest Projections

III. Key institutional milestones

I. Political and Policy Developments

1. von der Leyen's second term bid faces growing challenges

Commission President Ursula von der Leyen is facing growing challenges in her bid for a second term.

The European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) is investigating allegations of criminal wrongdoing, including conflict of interest, related to the COVID-19 vaccine deal between von der Leyen and Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla. The EPPO investigation comes on the back of other lawsuits launched by Hungary and the New York Times targeting von der Leyen's exchanges with Pfizer.

von der Leyen is also facing criticism over the appointment of Markus Pieper, a German centre-right MEP, for the high-level position of SME Envoy. Pieper was chosen over other candidates who allegedly performed better in the recruitment process. Heavyweight commissioners Nicolas Schmit (who is lead candidate for the Party of European Socialists), Paolo Gentiloni, Thierry Breton, as well as High Representative Josep Borrell sent a letter to von der Leyen stressing that Pieper's appointment raises "questions about the transparency and impartiality of the process." The letter can be viewed in the context of the ongoing elections campaign (Schmit, Gentiloni and Borrell are associated with PES, and Breton with Renew Europe), but it is also an unusually bold move for European Commission internal governance standards, which reflects rumoured grumblings on von der Leyen's management style.

These developments risk weakening von der Leyen's position with potential post-election allies, as well with national leaders, just as she is launching her campaign.

2. Rumours of pro-EU coalition agreement for the next term

There is increasing talk in Brussels of a potential written programme that would form the basis of a coalition agreement between mainstream parties for the next term.

The idea is reportedly being pushed by senior liberal and socialist figures, amid speculations about potential convergence between the European People's Party (EPP) and the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) after the elections. The agreement would enable the EPP, PES and Renew to develop a common platform to ensure cohesion in the next term.

A coalition agreement would be a first in EU history as Commission programmes are usually developed in an informal process involving both European political parties and national governments.

3. Fears of Russian influence in the EU elections intensify

On 29 March, French MEP Valérie Hayer, the President of the Renew Europe group and French President Macron's top candidate in the EU elections, tabled a request for an urgent parliamentary debate on the scale of Russia's influence ahead of the EU elections.

In her [letter](#) to the President of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola, Hayer refers to reports from security services from Poland, Czechia and Belgium, claiming that politicians have been paid by Russia or its proxies to "disseminate propaganda." She urges the European Parliament to conduct an immediate and transparent investigation on the scale of Russian influence, adding that any sitting MEPs or candidates with ties to the Kremlin must be exposed.

Meanwhile, German far-right politician Petr Bystron, who ranks second in AfD's list for the EU elections, is being accused of taking money from Russia. He is also suspected to have been in contact with Voice of Europe, a news network allegedly supporting Russia's disinformation efforts in the EU. While Bystron has refuted the accusations thus far, the scale of allegations has caused waves within the AfD, with party leaders Alice Weidel and Tino Chrupalla having reportedly demanded Bystron provides a written explanation.

4. Eurostat releases data on people eligible to vote

On 4 April, Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union, released [figures](#) from national statistical institutes showing the number of people eligible to vote in the forthcoming EU elections.

Germany will have the largest number of eligible voters, projected at 64.9 million individuals, followed by France with 49.7 million and Italy with 47 million. Belgium, France, and Germany are anticipated to have the highest proportions of first-time voters, accounting for 9.7%, 8.0%, and 7.9% respectively.

The lowest numbers of voters are expected in Malta with 20,000, Cyprus with 37,000, and Estonia with 70,000.

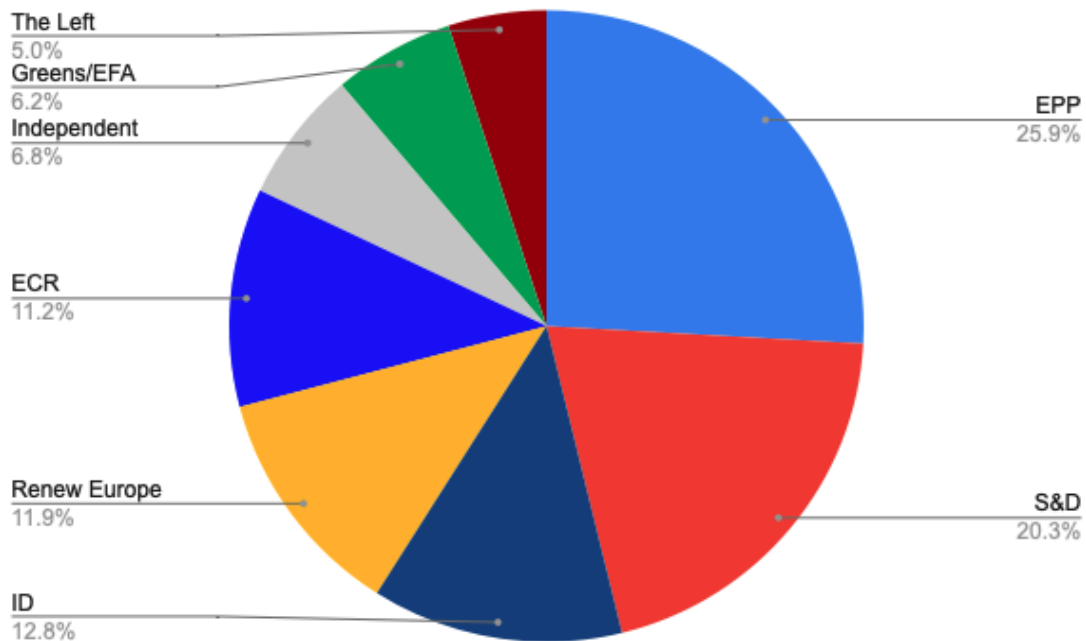
5. New Portuguese centre-right government takes office

Centre-right leader Luís Montenegro was sworn in as Portugal's new Prime Minister on 2 April. His appointment follows an inconclusive general election in which his party, the Democratic Alliance, got the most votes but fell short of securing the 116 seats required to form a governing majority.

The new Prime Minister will lead a minority government, leaving both the Socialist Party and the emerging far-right party Chega in opposition. Montenegro is expected to collaborate with the socialists on issues of common interest. Their leader, Pedro Nuno Santos, recently indicated that he would assist Montenegro in amending the country's budget to increase funding for education, police, and healthcare. However, long-term collaboration seems challenging, as Santos also made it clear he would not serve as Montenegro's crutch.

Montenegro appointed a pro-EU cabinet to help further strengthen Lisbon's relationship with Brussels. Four of the ministers he picked are serving MEPs, and his chief of staff previously served in Portugal's Permanent Representation to the EU.

II. Latest Projections



1. **European People's Party (EPP):** 176 seats
2. **Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D):** 138 seats
3. **Identity and Democracy (ID):** 87 seats
4. **Renew Europe:** 81 seats
5. **European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR):** 76 seats
6. **Independent:** 46 seats
7. **Greens– European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA):** 42 seats
8. **The Left (GUE/NGL):** 34 seats

Source: [Politico](#) (3/4/2024).

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 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