

# LETTER FROM BERLIN



## Germany's Threats From the Far Right

*Emmanuel Macron and Olaf Scholz, call your office!*

BY KLAUS C. ENGELEN

As the history of the European Union shows, over the decades France and Germany—the two largest countries and economies—were the motors of integration of the twenty-seven EU member countries and their combined population of 450 million.

As the results of the June 2024 European Parliament elections show, France and Germany as the largest EU democracies are threatened as never before by the growth of far-right parties promising to disempower or even abolish the European Union. Thus, what happens in France with respect to keeping the far-right there in check is important to Germany's challenge of coping with a far-right party like the Alternative für Deutschland, especially in its eastern states.

The twin specters of nearly eleven million French men and women voting in the 2024 European

Parliament election for Marine Le Pen's National Rally with its far-right agenda, and the AfD on the brink of governing in some eastern German states, are emerging as growing

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threats to the political and economic stability of the European Union's largest democracies.

The AfD, founded in 2013 as an economically liberal euroskept conservative movement opposed to the policies of the eurozone, was gradually taken over by populists and nationalists who favor dismantling the European Union, closing the borders to immigration especially

for Muslims, giving defenders of Germany's Nazi era a political platform, and poisoning the political debate with Russian propaganda despite the threat posed by Putin's invasion of Ukraine. AfD is classified by the German authorities and judiciary as a "suspected extremist party."

On June 9, 2024, *Politico* reported on the European election results with the headline, "Far-right gains humble Macron and Scholz." This very much captured the unfolding drama. Based on population, Germany is allotted ninety-six seats in the 2024–2029 European Parliament, followed by France with eighty-one seats, and Italy with seventy-six seats.

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AfD which won fifteen seats. The alliance of the Christian Democratic Union and Bavaria's Christian Social Union together kept thirty seats. The liberal Free Democratic Party held on to their five seats. The Greens lost nine seats, keeping only twelve. The big surprise is that Germany's new populist party BSW, which challenges the far-right AfD in the EU elections and is led by former Left Party head Sahra Wagenknecht, as newcomer won six seats. The left party Die Linke was able to keep three seats but lost two.

### STRONGEST IN THE EAST

To the horror of the ruling traffic-light coalition of the SPD, the Greens, and the FDP under Scholz, the AfD won the most votes in five eastern German states in the 2024 European elections. These election gains show the dimensions of the political division in Europe's largest democracy.

As Germany's leading anti-immigration party, the AfD won 31.8 percent of the vote in Saxony, 30.5 percent in Saxony-Anhalt, 28.3 percent in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, 30.7 percent in Thuringia, and 27.5 percent in Brandenburg. In nationwide polling, the AfD gets 15.9 percent.

In the European elections, the high frustration level in the eastern states made the AfD the second-strongest party in the country. From exit polls, it is apparent that in the former communist states, worries about economic welfare and anger over the failure to stop illegal immigration were major drivers for the AfD surge. The growing fear of not to be able to maintain their standard of living was a motive to vote for the AfD.

But as the *Financial Times* reported last year while covering the October elections of affluent Hesse and Bavaria, the AfD performed strongly there, garnering 14.6 percent in Bavaria and 18.4 percent in Hesse, its best results in a western state, "capitalizing on resistance to immigration and frustration

## EU Political Earthquake

Marine Le Pen's far-right National Rally led the first round of France's parliamentary elections on June 30, getting 33 percent of the vote, as the left-wing New Popular Front coalition came second with 28 percent, and President Emmanuel Macron's Ensemble alliance wound up with a dismal 21 percent. This was not only a political earthquake for France but also a shock for the EU member countries and for democracies around the world.

A massive effort by the centrist and left camps directed tactical withdrawals of candidates shortly before the runoff elections, successfully bundling votes against National Rally candidates.

In the end, the left New Popular Front, an alliance of parties ranging from the far-left France Unbowed party to the more moderate Socialists and Ecologists, won 182 seats in the National Assembly as the largest grouping, but fell short of the 289 required for an absolute majority. National Rally with 143 seats took third place behind Macron's centrist Ensemble coalition's 168 seats.

—K. Engelen



French President  
Emmanuel Macron



Marine Le Pen,  
National Rally  
parliamentary party  
leader in the France's  
National Assembly.

with Scholz's coalition." The results of Sunday elections, said the *Financial Times*, "may have been a triumph for the AfD but they were disastrous for the three parties in Germany's governing coalition—Olaf Scholz's Social Democrats, the Greens, and the liberal FDP, all of whose votes shrank. Voters seemed to be punishing them for everything from high inflation, recession, and surging energy costs to a jump in irregular immigration that is straining towns and villages nationwide." They quoted Alice Weidel, co-chair of the AfD, saying that "the AfD is no longer an eastern phenomenon—it is an all-German, mainstream party. Voters have clearly swung from left to right."

Manfred Güllner, head of pollsters Forsa, argues that "frustration with Scholz's government predated the surge in refugee numbers and had

more to do with climate policies, in particular a law to phase out gas-fired boilers and replace them with heat pumps." The AfD's Weidel acknowledges that the boiler ban was one of the key factors in the AfD's sudden change of fortune. "People call it the heating massacre," she said in a June 27, 2023, *Financial Times* article. "The government is intervening directly in people's ownership rights. It's *de facto* expropriation, and people just won't stand for it."

### FAR RIGHT AT THE DOOR

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German Chancellor  
Olaf Scholz

## Had a Bad Day

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's Social Democratic Party, Germany's oldest political party founded in 1863, won only fourteen seats in the June 2024 European Parliament elections, and fell behind the far-right AfD which won fifteen seats.

—K. Engelen

Ensemble alliance wound up with a dismal 21 percent, according to final results published by the Interior Ministry the following day. This was not only a political earthquake for France but also a shock for the EU member countries and for democracies around the world.

As Ellen Ioanes of *Vox* pointed out in her analysis on the 2024 elections, “Europeans did vote in more right-wing politicians in Germany, France, the Netherlands, Spain, and Italy, among others. But part of the rightward push is also driven by centrist politicians moving further to the right on migration in particular, operating under the premise that immigration is a major concern for voters and that promising harsher policies

would help the center retain power.” She points out that “other major issues included the economy, cost of living, defense, and the environment; besides immigration, the right wing was especially able to capitalize on environmental policies because of large-scale protests by European farmers, especially in France and Germany, about the economic effects of the bloc’s climate change policies.”

On June 11, a timely comprehensive overview of how gains by the far right will affect the European Parliament and European Union arrived from the think tank Chatham House in London.

Far-right political parties made gains, they concluded, “but did not do quite as well as some anticipated. While Italy, France, and Germany saw significant gains for the far right, the picture across the rest of the EU is more nuanced. Far right parties only came first in five countries, and second or third in another five, predominantly at the expense of liberal and green parties. While the far right ‘surge’ failed to materialize, the long-term trend demonstrates increasing support for anti-establishment, populist, and Eurosceptic parties at both the European and national levels. This is reason for concern, especially as centre parties continue to normalize far right parties by adopting their ideas and rhetoric.” The Chatham House analysts put up a warning sign of “156” seats as the number of far-right members elected to the 2024 European Parliament.

### SNAP ELECTION SHOCK

As war in Europe for the first time since World War II raged between Russian and Ukraine, deepening

*A poster for the New Popular Front in the 2024 French legislative elections.*

the uncertainty over whether the United States will continue to shield Europe through NATO against escalating Russian aggression, French President Macron called a snap election and dismissed the lower house of parliament, causing a political earthquake in France and sending shockwaves through Europe and the world.

No wonder that *The Economist* on June 20 came up with a devastating judgement: “It may not measure up to Napoleon’s march on Moscow in 1812, but Emmanuel Macron’s decision to call a parliamentary election this month is looking like one of the most self-destructive gambles by a French leader in modern times. After seven years under his centrist government, voters’ judgment threatens to be severe. It may well plunge France into a political, and perhaps even economic, crisis. One victim would be Mr. Macron’s own project of reform.”

The crushing blow for the French president, noted *Politico*, “came as the far-right Alternative for Germany (AFD) celebrated a ‘historic’ second place finish, ahead of Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s Social Democratic Party (SPD), according to projections.



Elsewhere, Europe's conservatives consolidated their grip on the EU's Parliament, putting Ursula von der Leyen in a decent but not completely secure position to win a second term in office."

The specter of Le Pen's far-right National Rally getting her young leader Jordan Bardella installed as the youngest-ever French prime minister

## The big positive news for Europe came when Ursula von der Leyen was reelected as European Commission president for another five years.

in a "cohabitation" with a lame-duck President Macron in the Élysée Palace was a nightmare in European capitals and the business world.

The big positive news for Europe came on July 18, when von der Leyen was reelected as European Commission president for another five years with 401 in favor and 284 against with fifteen abstentions.

### LEFT WINS SECOND ROUND

"Relief in Europe after left wins France's snap election," *Deutsche Welle* reported on July 8 when results were in on the second round of Macron's snap election. A massive effort by the centrist and left camps directed tactical withdrawals of candidates shortly before the runoff elections, successfully bundling votes against National Rally candidates.

According to *Le Monde*, the left New Popular Front, an alliance of parties ranging from the far-left France Unbowed party to the more moderate Socialists and Ecologists, won 182 seats in the National Assembly as the largest grouping, but fell short of the 289 required for an absolute majority. Le Pen's far-right National Rally with 143 seats took third place behind

Macron's centrist Ensemble coalition's 168 seats. The Republicans got 46 seats, and a handful of other parties won the remaining 38 seats. France's lower house of parliament has 577 seats. With respect to National Rally, they were able to mobilize nearly ten million voters, many participating for the first time.

In their report on the second-round election results under the heading "Leftist surge foils far right but French election ends in deadlock," CNN's Christian Edwards and Xiaofei Xu warn that "the RN's success should not be underestimated. In the 2017 elections, when Macron swept to power, the RN won just eight seats. In 2022, it surged to eighty-nine seats. In Sunday's vote, it won 125—making it the largest individual party in parliament. While the risk of a far-right government has been avoided for now, these elections have plunged France into political uncertainty."

"There is something dishonest about Emmanuel Macron calling a snap election and then doing everything to usurp its outcome," argue the *Eurointelligence* observers in their July 2, 2024, dispatch under the heading "Voting right, governing left."

"What Macron will end up with is what he was seeking to escape: a hung parliament with no clear majority. It may be a relief for financial markets,

## The big surprise is Germany's new populist party BSW, which challenges the far-right AfD in the EU elections.

but only for a short time. The inability to govern without a clear majority in the National Assembly since 2022 was behind Macron's decision to call legislative elections about three weeks ago." The *Eurointelligence* watchers

*Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has secured his role as troublemaker in the European Union for the next several years.*



see "an assembly without clear majority and Macron back to square one. And another election in a year's time is beckoning."

"Adieu Attal, bienvenue Attal," read *Eurointelligence* on July 17, 2024. "Gabriel Attal resigned as prime minister and was nominated caretaker prime minister, as there is still no candidate on the horizon. The left alliance remains disunited over whom to nominate, with the risk they have lost the moment!"

### ORBAN REMAINS AS TROUBLEMAKER

Marlene Wind, professor of political science at the University of Copenhagen, should have the last word on the troubling state of the European Union. In a blog post she wrote about the role of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and the security risk that Orbán poses as Putin's willing puppet, and the scope of the hybrid war that Russia is currently waging against our societies, referring to Orbán as "the enemy within."

By putting Le Pen's National Rally together with the nationalistic far-right "Patriots for Europe" in the 2024–2029 European Parliament with 84 members, they organized the third-largest group with thirteen nationalities. Orbán has secured his role as troublemaker in the European Union for the next several years. That he gave the presidency of the group to France's Jordan Bardella with National Rally's thirty seats was a smart move. ◆