

## PRELIMINARY STATEMENT

### Higher political stakes for European elections demonstrate clear need to further harmonise and safeguard democratic practices

**BRUSSELS, 10 JUNE 2024:** Democracy was tested on various levels in these elections. National political parties and candidates campaigned increasingly on shared European issues, but with little visibility of their European political families and their lead candidates. Acts of violence against politicians in some Member States were a pronounced sign of a growing societal polarisation, compounded by fears of a wider political rift and concerns about foreign interference. Debates increasingly focused on the future composition of the European Parliament and decision-making in the immediate aftermath of the elections.

Electoral reform and legal innovation efforts remain to be completed and implemented. Against this background, Election-Watch.EU assessed the strengths and weaknesses of the electoral process across the Member States, highlighting good practices and areas of progress while identifying key challenges that require attention. The Mission provides a preliminary assessment of equality, inclusion, transparency, accountability, integrity, and resilience in the European elections.

#### Equality of participation and representation

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*Disparities in suffrage rights, representation opportunities, campaign finance rules, and voting options persist with a need for further harmonisation to reduce inequality across Member States.*

EU bodies have initiated and advanced **electoral reforms** and enhanced the broader rights framework. However, important reforms aimed at increasing the cohesion of electoral rules and procedures across the Union have yet to be completed. **Suffrage rights** were expanded in a few Member States. Belgium and Germany joined Austria and Malta in lowering the voting age to 16, resulting in a total of 2 million eligible voters below the age of 18. Belgium also reduced the candidacy age to 18, while it remained 25 in Greece and Italy. Significant disparities in enfranchisement and restrictions on voting and candidacy rights remain.

The **distribution of the 720 seats** in the European Parliament among Member States for the next term meets EU Treaty requirements and reduced disparities in the weight of the vote between Member States, but a permanent seat distribution method based on objective criteria remains to be developed by 2026. The **proportional representation system** is unequally implemented across Member States. There are different thresholds to obtain a mandate. In 9 Member States individual candidacy is not permitted, and in 6 no preferential vote is possible. Cyprus recently abolished compulsory voting, which remains in place in 4 Member States. Although mostly not enforced, disproportionate fines envisaged include a temporary withdrawal of voting rights (Belgium) and one-year imprisonment (Greece).

Nearly 18.400 candidates and 490 candidate lists stood on the ballots, competing under unequal conditions across the Member States. **Candidate registration and campaign periods** ranged from several months to a few weeks. Public funding, considered as a measure to enhance equality, is not provided in 8 Member States. Despite efforts to “Europeanise” the European Parliament elections, most of the Member States implicitly prohibit the use of the name or the logo of European political parties on the ballots.

Most EU countries offer voters advance and **alternative voting options**, such as voting from abroad, by post, or using a mobile ballot box, but access to alternative voting modalities and the number of options available still vary greatly. Four Member States (Czechia, Ireland, Malta, Slovakia) do not offer any possibility of voting from abroad to their citizens.

### Inclusion of underrepresented groups

*Special measures foster electoral inclusion and representation among marginalised groups, with good practices serving as inspiration for further efforts to address serious remaining gaps.*

Positive measures implemented in many countries have advanced **women's inclusion**, contributing to a 41 per cent representation in the outgoing parliament. Eleven countries have legislated quotas and some, like Italy, Spain and Portugal reinforce their effect through rank-order rules. In practice, the inclusion of women as candidates ranged from parity (France) to less than one-third such as in Hungary and Cyprus. Women's political participation was hardly raised in European party manifestos, and only 6 national election administrations are headed by a woman.

Participation of **persons with disabilities** in elections has improved but still varies between Member States, and accessibility remains an issue, especially in Cyprus and Malta. Since 2019, Germany, France, Slovenia and Luxembourg abolished restrictions on voting rights for persons under guardianship, to align with international obligations. Nevertheless, 13 Member States do not grant voting rights, and even more restrict candidacy for persons under guardianship. Several countries, including Luxembourg, improved their legislation to explicitly require polling station accessibility and facilitate participation by providing free transport and improved ballot readability.

Around 11 million **mobile EU citizens** (EU citizens living in another EU Member State) were eligible to vote either in their country of residence or citizenship. However, their turnout has been low in the past, and data about their participation remains opaque. Their registration in host countries was hampered by language barriers, as for instance in Croatia, and early deadlines, for instance up to five months in Spain. Mobile EU citizens could also stand as candidates in their country of residence, although procedures varied by Member State. Approval of amendments to EU rules to enhance the participation of mobile EU citizens is pending.

Despite making up a considerable part of the population, with up to 25 million young people eligible to vote for the first time, **youth** is underrepresented in EU decision-making. There were only 2 Members under the age of 30 in the outgoing parliament. In the 2024 elections, youth candidates were not listed in electable positions in 15 Member States, highlighting remaining barriers. There is no unified approach to citizenship education across the EU. Germany, among others, provides good practices and multi-pronged approaches to youth inclusion in the European elections.

Some EU Member States provide special measures to facilitate electoral participation of **national minorities**. Slovenia and Sweden, for example, offer ballots and other electoral materials in minority languages. The Roma are Europe's largest ethnic minority, but measures to facilitate their political participation remain insufficient.

### Transparency of electoral processes

*Publishing detailed election results, restricting anonymous and foreign funding, and labelling political advertisements enhance public trust but some Member States need to further improve transparency.*

Most Member States publish detailed **election results** per polling station, with Austria having recently adopted such requirements and Slovakia making scans of polling station result protocols available online. These practices contribute to transparency and enhance public confidence. In contrast, 4 Member States do not publish disaggregated election results, and in some countries, there is still a lack of accessibility to essential election information.

A detailed reporting framework overseen by an independent European authority enhances transparency and oversight of European Political Parties, which are permitted to conduct transnational campaigns. Most campaign transactions are, however, made by national political parties, resulting in **campaign financing** transparency being largely dependent on national regulations. Only in half of the Member States is the legal framework for political party and campaign finance fully adequate. Laws and regulations vary widely, from loosely structured rules in Germany, Denmark, and the Netherlands, to tightly regulated systems in Latvia, Romania, and Slovakia. Limited anonymous funding is allowed in 6 Member States, and forms of foreign funding are permitted in 11, contrary to recent Commission recommendations warning against anonymous and unchecked donations from third countries. Third-party campaigning remains largely under-regulated across the EU. Positively, online campaigning is covered by campaign finance regulations in 16 Member States, and the new European regulation on the transparency and targeting of political advertising will provide further guidance once fully in effect.

### Accountability of political actors

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*Regulation and oversight of offline and online campaigns increase the accountability of political actors but require effective implementation and adjustment of different rules across Member States.*

Ten EU Member States do not have any **campaign spending** limits or bans on types of campaign expenditure. Requirements to reveal the sources and amounts of contributions, the purpose and amounts of expenses, and to make relevant reports timely and publicly available also vary. Disclosure requirements are insufficiently detailed in a number of countries, but particularly so in Cyprus and Poland. Sanctions for campaign finance violations do not appear effective, dissuasive and proportionate in about half of the Member States, and the oversight body for campaign finance is not assessed as being fully independent, impartial and transparent in 10 Member States.

The EU has adopted new legislation to regulate **digital service providers**, such as social media platforms. The Commission has also issued guidelines to ensure election integrity by mitigating systemic risks, and, together with the new national Digital Services Coordinators, oversees enforcement. While 21 Member States have appointed these coordinators, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, and Slovakia have not, and those in Portugal and Cyprus lack sufficient resources. Ireland is noted for effective implementation, while the Commission has opened infringement procedures against 6 countries for non-compliance. The Commission has also begun investigating large online platforms for several violations of the new law, including deceptive political advertising and the discontinuation of a monitoring tool.

### Integrity of electoral conduct

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*Trust in national election administrations and voter registration systems remains high, while enhancing European data exchange and electoral dispute resolution is crucial.*

The largest group (11) of national **election administrations** follow a governmental model, with a professionalised, non-partisan composition, and these enjoy high public trust overall. The European Cooperation Network on Elections has become a valuable forum between Member States for facilitating contacts, mutual learning, and inspiring improvements. National representatives are increasingly coordinating and exchanging on good electoral practices.

An estimated 359 million voters were eligible to take part in these elections. No centralised **voter register** exists for the European elections, as each Member State maintains its own voter register with different cut-off dates. Data exchange among Member States on possible multiple entries remains a challenge, not least because data about dual citizenship is neither available nor exchanged. Active voter registration is required in Cyprus and Ireland while in all other Member States eligible voters are automatically included. Recently Poland and Latvia introduced central voter registers, but Ireland and

Italy still have decentralised voter lists at municipal level. Overall, the confidence in voter registration procedures for the European elections is high, with the notable exception of Hungary.

**Electoral dispute resolution** in the European elections is predominantly a matter for responsible national institutions. At least half of the Member States, including Finland and Luxembourg, define narrowly what complaints can be filed before election day. In Austria, complaints of rejected contestants are only dealt with after elections, detracting from timely redress. Decisions of 4 election administrations as well as the final election results or challenges related to them, as in Belgium, Netherlands, and Romania, are not subject to review and appeal in courts, which is at odds with international standards.

## Resilience to risks and threats

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*In response to mal-intended interference, various resilience mechanisms have been put in place. Free media and an active civil society are crucial for safeguarding democracy but need to be protected.*

While the EU generally remains a safe space for free and independent **media**, there are concerns pertaining to cases of arrests, surveillance, political pressure, and violence against journalists, as well as media ownership concentration. With new legislation the EU attempts to protect media independence, freedom and pluralism, as well as journalists and non-governmental organisations from abusive cross-border lawsuits intended to silence or intimidate them. A self-regulatory regime against disinformation for social media platforms has been set up to prevent, detect, take down or label disinformation online. Various fact checking initiatives and hybrid threat response mechanisms protect the European elections against information manipulation and interference.

European institutions emphasise the important role of civil society in safeguarding and promoting human rights and take measures to protect **civic space**. Yet, multiple civic space infringements have been reported for a number of Member States, with the most concerning trends in Hungary and Slovakia. In this context, non-partisan election observation by citizens is crucial. The European Commission has urged Member States to enable both international and citizen observation, yet only 7 Member States have legal frameworks for both. The election was most observed in Bulgaria where national elections were held concurrently. Although voting and counting are public in 11 Member States, enhancing public access, systems without adequate accreditation procedures may be misused. Election-Watch.EU has received accreditation in 12 out of 27 Member States.

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Election-Watch.EU conducted its second Election Assessment Mission to the European Parliament elections in all 27 EU Member States. The [Mission](#) of 77 election experts and observers and 10 like-minded citizen election observer organisations followed established election observation methodology and used international and regional human rights standards and commitments as references. Election-Watch.EU will publish a **final report with findings and recommendations** to strengthen European electoral integrity and to enhance democratic practices. The aim is to raise awareness of the importance of the European elections by highlighting good electoral practices among Member States and to provide a sound basis for electoral reforms at European and Member State levels.

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[Election-Watch.EU](#) is an independent and impartial civil society organisation of international election experts and observers, endorser of the [Declaration of Global Principles for International Election Observation](#) and member of the [Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors](#) and the [European Partnership for Democracy](#). For further information please contact: [office@election-watch.eu](mailto:office@election-watch.eu)