

2019: Europe's year of reckoning

What with Brexit and EU parliament elections looming, dramatic change could happen in Europe next year, writes Joschka Fischer, a former German foreign minister.



Politically, 2019 will be an extraordinarily important year for the European Union. The United Kingdom is currently on track to leave the EU on March 29, 2019. And, following elections to the European Parliament in May, nearly all of the most important leadership positions across EU institutions will turn over. Thus, depending on how parliamentary seats are distributed, Europe could witness a major realignment of power among member states, within EU institutions, and between member states and the Parliament.

The new distribution of power within EU institutions will be reflected largely through personnel. New presidents of the European Commission, the European Council, and the European Central Bank will be appointed, and a new High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy will be chosen. If nationalist Euroskeptic parties become the largest group in the European Parliament, these appointments could represent an abrupt break from the past.

EU member states are more divided now than ever, even on the most fundamental issues concerning the European project. The broad pro-European consensus of the past has been replaced by a resurgent nationalism. Moreover, east is increasingly pitted against west, and north against south. And there is good reason to fear that these widening rifts will be reflected in the new composition of the Parliament, making majority governance difficult if not impossible.

Today's de facto grand coalition between the conservative European People's Party (EPP) and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) most likely will not survive beyond the elections. The S&D, in particular, is in deep — indeed, existential — crisis across Europe. And there are new players on the field, including French President Emmanuel Macron's centrist La République En Marche! and a smattering of radical Euroskeptic and nationalist parties.

The end of the West

Given the unprecedented prominence of nationalist parties in this election cycle, the usual pro forma European campaign issues will inevitably take a back seat. This will be a contest about Europe and the future of European democracy. Recent developments in a number of member states have challenged foundational EU principles such as the rule of law and the separation of powers. These democratic institutions, as well as questions of European solidarity and sovereignty, will all effectively be on the ballot.

Needless to say, the parliamentary elections will have far-reaching implications for Europe's future in a rapidly changing world. The current president of the United States has such disdain for the EU that many now talk of "the end of the West." An increasingly revanchist Russia is waging wars along the European periphery and in Syria. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is taking his country down the path of authoritarianism. And China is demanding recognition as a global power.

Worse still, US President Donald Trump's recent decision to withdraw the US from the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty with Russia raises the threat of a renewed arms race. And this is coinciding with an escalating climate crisis and a global contest for predominance in artificial intelligence, the risks of which are still largely unaccounted for.

Don't count on help from abroad

Against this dismal backdrop, the question is what will become of Europe: Will Europeans manage to hold on to their sovereignty, or will their self-inflicted disunity render them ever more dependent on other powers?

Pro-EU parties must make Europe's place in the world a central issue of the parliamentary election campaign; otherwise, they will suffer a shattering defeat at the hands of the new nationalists. The nationalists want to return to the past; it is up to the pro-Europeans to offer answers for the future.

Make no mistake: A nationalist victory next year would rock the EU to its core and throw it into another deep crisis. It would represent a defeat for the fundamental values of the European project. Given the scale of the threat, pro-

Europeans cannot count on business as usual. Recent upheavals in many member states' party systems have altered the electoral calculus, and the pro-Europeans must adapt accordingly.

For my part, I foresee next year's elections auguring dramatic change in Europe. For better or worse, the question of Europe itself has been politicized, and now it must be decided. There will either be a rebirth of nationalism or a victory for EU-level democracy and unity. Sadly, pro-Europeans cannot hope for any help from abroad. In fact, the opposite is true: Europe must be vigilant in policing foreign interference in its affairs — including its elections.

In recent years, there has been much talk of the EU suffering from a “democratic deficit.” But the fight for a majority in the European Parliament actually represents a major opportunity for democracy. Pro-Europeans need only wake up in time to seize it — or Europe's enemies will.

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