

# The EU in 2019: Challenges and crises await

The EU is set for a makeover in 2019, but familiar problems — populism, trade disputes, migration and budget deficits — continue to weigh on the bloc. DW's Bernd Riegert takes a look at what to expect this year.



French EU campaign poster reading 'This time, I'll register to vote'

The European Union has had to deal with a whole series of crises in 2018: the paralyzing Brexit negotiations, the trade dispute with the United States, the growth of right-wing populist movements, and rows with Poland, Hungary and Romania about constitutional weakness. Can 2019 be any worse? Yes, it can — but it doesn't have to be.

In May 2019, a new European Parliament will be elected — the only supranational, democratically elected parliament in the world. Then, in the autumn, fresh faces will occupy top EU offices, from president of the European Commission to president of the European Central Bank. That on its own won't make the crises go away, but it does provide an opportunity for new beginnings and a new approach.

## **More radicals in parliament**

If the pollsters are to be believed, the number of radical right-wing and populist representatives in the European Parliament could double, from 10 to 20 percent. The anti-EU faction is not predicted to become the strongest group, but it will gain more influence and the ability to delay integration and reforms.

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The election result will likely reflect growing popular dissatisfaction with the EU. There may be little factual basis for feeling that EU membership has no advantages, but the populists, from Marine Le Pen in France to Matteo Salvini in Italy and Alexander Gauland in Germany, know how to fuel that feeling. Overrun by migrants, socially cut off from globalization? Rational politicians and supporters of the EU need to counter this false and sinister picture once and for all. They must thwart the nationalism of "my country first" with a clear message that "Europe is more important" for prosperity and peace.

## **A smaller EU**

With the departure of the UK, the EU will shrink for the first time in its history. This will certainly weaken it, at least where foreign and security policy are concerned. Without Britain's military might, the EU, too, will count for less in the world. Economically speaking, citizens in the bloc will cope without the British. The damage for the UK is likely to be far greater. The British government itself admitted that Brexit will have initial negative effects. The lower house of the British Parliament is completely deadlocked, meaning that there's still a chance Brexit will be postponed, or possibly canceled altogether.

## **Italy's populists are still a challenge**

Once the UK, a net contributor, quits the EU, other net contributors, such as Italy, will carry more weight. They should also pay more into the shared budget, but the populist government in Rome is unpredictable. The leader of the radical right-wing Lega party, Matteo Salvini, is still not satisfied with being minister of the interior. He wants to be prime minister, and is sure to make Brussels the scapegoat of his campaign. If Italy slips into recession, that will of course be the fault of the European Commission. There is a glimmer of hope, in that the row about the 2019 budget was resolved in December, at least for now, despite Italy's

deficit being too high. In the medium term, though, there are tough financial years still to come for Italy in 2020 and 2021.



Dissatisfaction with the status quo, and France's president in particular, threatens to make 2019 a difficult year

### **EU needs fresh impetus**

The current counterweight to the populist anti-EU movements is French President Emmanuel Macron and his rather unstable political party. If Macron loses momentum following the protests by the “yellow vests,” the EU will lose one of its driving forces. This is why the bloc will need to rely on fresh impetus from Germany in the coming year as well. Could a new government coalition in Berlin of conservatives and Greens, with new leaders, show more verve where Europe is concerned, or will Chancellor Angela Merkel continue to slog her way through the thicket of crises?

Apart from the EU's internal problems, there will also be more foreign policy storms: the threat from Russia; competition with China over the technology industry and influence in Africa; the unpredictable “deal-maker” in the White House. The shift to a digital, low-emission, artificial intelligence-driven economy will require a lot of energy and good ideas in 2019. Here, the European Commission can come into its own. Here, the EU can prove that we achieve more together than we do alone. Thirty years on from the great societal upheaval in Eastern Europe, 2019 is not going to be easy — but the EU is accustomed to

dealing with crises.

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