

JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

THE WIDER WORLD

The Year of European Elections Continues

By Diane Chido
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Map of Europe including the Caucasus Mountains region

In a previous essay, we examined European, United Kingdom, and French parliamentary elections. Many are calling this “The Year of Elections,” as there are so many taking place. Across Europe, there will be at least eight other legislative elections in 2024, some of which have already taken place. For orientation, please refer to the map.^[i] The elections in France and Great Britain, in which voters turned out in higher-than-expected numbers to ensure the far right did not have outright wins, those parties did manage to gain ground and draw some seats away from left and centrist parties, particularly in local elections.

Although its election took place in 2023, **Poland** is another compelling case for inclusion considering the continuing fears of “right turns” across Europe. This country ironically scrambled to join European institutions after the end of the Cold War to ensure it remained outside Russia’s autocratic grasp. In 1989, 63% of the Polish population went to the polls to vote the Communist Party out of their government but in October 2023, a historic 73% voted to oust the right-wing Law and Justice Party that had gained power in 2015 and then worked hard to erode democratic institutions.

This move to the right mirrored a similar turn to the right in Israel as discussed in a previous [essay](#), support for which has also declined since the war in Gaza, Hamas’ refusal to release all the hostages, and Israel’s inability to secure them.

Many observers have noted that the last straw for Polish voters seems to have been the mainly Catholic conservative Law and Justice Party outlawing abortion nationwide in 2020. This is believed to have been the catalyst that turned the tide on its popularity, which resulted in the Law and Justice Party.^[ii] The centrist Civic Coalition (KO), center-right Third Way (Trzecia Droga) and The Left (Lewica), formed a coalition government that put PiS in the minority at the national level.

Local elections in April 2024, however, resulted in large local gains by Law and Justice Party, which won 34.27% of the votes and now controls seven of Poland’s 16 regional councils, somewhat like our state legislatures, suggesting that in many parts of Poland, the conservative wave is still cresting. The Civic Coalition won 30.59% of the vote to now control nine regional councils.^[iii] The old adage, “All politics are local,” seems to have held true despite the national center win.

Late January parliamentary elections in **Portugal** gave its center-right Democratic Alliance 80 seats in the 230-seat National Assembly or 34.7%, the largest total but a very tight margin for a governing party to go solo. The center-left Socialist Party came in second with 78 seats. While they have not joined in a formal coalition, they are likely to vote largely in tandem on legislation mainly to

block initiatives by the hard-right Enough (Chega) Party, which won 50 seats, a huge gain from only 12 seats in 2022.^[iv]

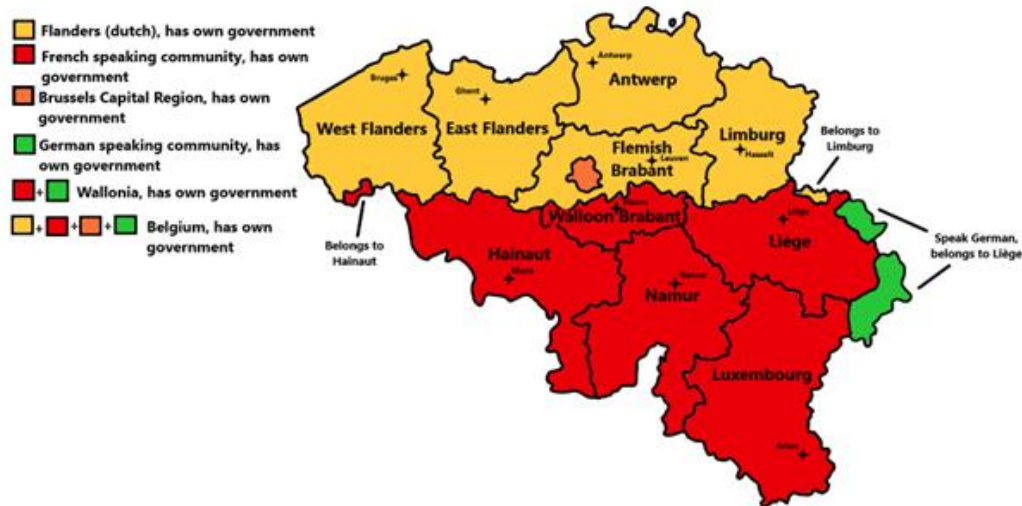
Belarus hardly needs mentioning as its Putinesque President Aleksandr Lukashenko has been solidly in power there since the position was created in 1994. In February, parties loyal to him won all 110 seats in the national parliament and the local councils. These were the only parties allowed to run and the opposition boycotted the election in protest.^[v]

Please indulge me in this personal aside about Belarus. On Sept. 11, 2001, I was working in my office at the International Monetary Fund, three blocks from the White House, on a report about the previous day's Belarusian presidential election, which everyone knew Lukashenko would win. Amid the terrorist attacks, my boss stood in my doorway waiting to evacuate and imploring me to *just go*, while my phone rang incessantly as my family desperately tried to find out if I was safe.

Ignoring all of them, I finished my report and then looked out the window. The view was completely obscured by smoke from the blazing Pentagon, and I finally realized that on that day of all days, no one in the world, maybe not even Belarusians, cared about Lukashenko's reelection. I told my boss as we hurried down the stairs that a high school friend had turned out to be right when he derisively predicted that I would finish a term paper even if the world were coming to an end.

Back to business. The **Croatian** Assembly (Hrvatski Sabor) has a unicameral legislature (only one house) with 151 seats. Citizens voted on April 24 with a coalition led by the Democratic Union of Christian Democrats who won 34.32% of the vote and 61 seats, five less than it won in the previous 2020 election. The Rivers of Justice (Rijeke Pravde) coalition, led by the Social Democratic Party, won 25.41% of the vote and 42 seats, gaining one seat over 2020. The remaining 48 seats were taken by five different parties that will have to align with one side or the other to have a voice in governing.^[vi] Most of these parties range to the right and contain nationalist groups skeptical of European integration, and some of the main coalition partners have refused to work with them.

On June 9, 2024, **Belgian** voters elected regional and federal parliaments the same day they voted for their European Parliamentary representatives. Belgium is an interesting place with four regional groupings and three major languages as indicated by the map.^[vii] Its Chamber of Representatives has 110 seats, 87 of which are from Flemish regions, 47 from Walloon regions, and 16 from the Brussels metropolitan area.



Map of Belgium's Regions

Flanders is the Flemish part of Belgium in the north, where mainly Dutch is spoken. The south is Wallonia, where the Walloons live, and where they speak mainly French. The capital, Brussels, home to EU and NATO HQ, is an independent region, somewhat like Washington, D.C., but all three languages are officially recognized. In the west, two exclaves that are officially part of Liège in Wallonia have mainly German speakers. Most Belgians speak French, Dutch, German, and English. The historical reasons for these divisions would make for a fascinating future read but are too complex to address here.

In 2019, the Belgian parliament saw a shift to the right, which many observers feared would increase in 2024. Far-right, populist, separatist Flemish Concerned (Vlaams Belang) gained 3% over 2019 for a Flemish total of 21.8%. Its conservative, nationalist Flemish rival, the New Flemish Alliance, retained its majority share with 25.6% percent of Flemish votes, leaving it the largest political party in Belgium.

In Wallonia, the centrist The Committed (Les Engagés) Party came in second to the French-speaking liberal Reformist Movement, which was a significant upset as The Committed had held the lead in the region for decades. The New Flemish Alliance leadership quickly refused to govern with the far-right Flemish Concerned and will have to seek support in the center-right, centrist, and center-left parties.^[viii] Thus, while the right looms, the center has held thus far.

Austria will hold its parliamentary election in late September. The Austrian far-right Freedom Party narrowly leads Austria's European Parliamentary election for the first time with 25.4% over the ruling People's Party with 24.5%.^[ix] Early polling on the September election have forecast a greater domestic lead in favor

of the Freedom Party. However, while the EP elections spelled alarm for liberals across the spectrum, the same rightward drift has not affected many national internal elections to the degree expected.

Georgia, which is not an EU member, will vote on all 150 parliamentary seats in late October. Fears have arisen as to how “free and fair” the elections will be in the face of recent protests and violent crackdowns in the capital, Tbilisi. These protests were sparked by a May 2024 vote in parliament, led by the right-wing Georgian Dream Party, to pass a “law on foreign agents” that requires parties receiving more than 20% of their funding from abroad to register these funds and their activities. Western-leaning President Salome Zurbishvili vetoed the law, but since only four members of the parliament voted against it, 84 members of the Georgian Dream Party voted for it, and the rest abstained. The veto was essentially ignored, and the law is set to go into effect July 30.

Georgia is in accession talks with the EU and had hoped to advance to member candidate status this year, with the president and the majority of young people supporting the move to unite with Europe. The U.S. warned that the law, often called the “Russian law” because of its similarity to one passed there previously to stifle support for liberalizing civil society groups, issued restrictions on travel to the country due to these efforts to undermine democracy and the violent reactions to the protests. The EU issued a statement that it could derail accession negotiations.[x]

Lithuanians will also go to the polls in October. There are mixed expectations on the outcome with some observers expecting a repeat of the European Parliament election in which the ruling conservative Homeland Union-Lithuanian Christian Democrats won three of its 11 seats and the centrist Social Democrats won two. Others forecast that the turnout for the domestic elections will be as much as double the European Parliament elections, which were the second lowest at 28.9% of the population voting, perhaps even as high as 60%. Some Lithuanian social scientists say this low turnout represents both those with grievances on the right and the most educated and loyal to the centrist party who felt a duty to exercise their right to be represented in the continental legislature, anticipating more Lithuanians will take part in determining their domestic future.

The forecasts on voter turnout to the Lithuanian parliamentary elections are based on the May 2024 presidential election when 49.6% of the population voted in the second-round runoff between current President Gitanas Nausėda and current Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė, both of whom support NATO and further EU integration, but differ on support for Taiwan’s independence and social issues, such as gay marriage, which the winning incumbent president supports and the losing PM opposes.[xi]

2024 is a big election year in **Romania**, where citizens voted for local posts in June alongside the European Parliament elections and will vote for president in September and parliament in December. The German Marshall Fund, an American but European-focused think tank noted that, “The Social Democrat Party is the leading member of the ruling alliance and the largest political party in Romania. The Social Democrat Party frequently prioritizes the expansion of social programs and the increase of public-sector wages, making it popular among older and lower-income voters. The National Liberal Party is the junior partner within the governing alliance and the major center-right political party in Romania. Historically, it has garnered support from entrepreneurs and middle-class voters by advocating for economic liberalization, privatization, and a reduced state role in the economy.”

In the past, the National Liberal Party rivaled the larger Social Democrat Party, but since they joined hands, the National Liberal Party has lost supporters who have mainly turned toward the United Right coalition, but internal power struggles among the United Right’s three constituent parties have threatened their eponymous unity and their ability to translate support into electoral gains. As a result, most observers are hesitant to make any grand predictions for the December parliamentary election, especially with the war in Ukraine continuing on its northern border.

The Covid-19 pandemic, subsequent inflation, employment losses and technological changes have caused many voters to wonder about the benefits of globalization and “progress” around the world. As a result, traditional conservative parties have been torn apart with the growth of anti-immigration and free trade sentiments. Traditional leftist parties have begun to question the social dislocation caused by all these changes and wonder if they need to become more radical in their efforts to support those left behind. These and other localized factors are stretching the social fabric to the point of fraying irreparably in many places, including the United States.

Traditional concepts of “right” and “left” and “conservative” and “liberal” are falling apart across the world and the concept of a political spectrum taught for so long in political science is increasingly coming under question. The Enlightenment was intended to leave power-play politics as taught by Machiavelli in the historical dustbin, but his ideology seems to be making a resurgence.

Fareed Zakaria calls this the “rise of illiberalism” in his new book, *Age of Revolutions*. Zakaria quoted Kenneth Clark from his television show “Civilizations,” noting in reference to Rome, but just as applicable to the West today, “It is lack of confidence, more than anything else, that kills a civilization.

We can destroy ourselves by cynicism and disillusion, just as effectively as by bombs.”^[xii]

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