Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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Europe: The centre holds but moves sharply to the right

Europe is facing a turbulent time in the wake of European parliament elections that have confirmed the rise of the far-right and the unpopularity of the governments of two of the EU's leading members, France and Germany. While European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen says the centre "is holding", it has moved decidedly to the right.

The results foreshadow a period of increased instability at the core of the European Union, both in the two key member states as well as in the European parliament.

The centre that von der Leyen talks about has taken some hits and has become more isolated. The way it now deals with the results, will decide the course of the EU over the next couple of years.

Particularly in Western Europe, the elections have made clear that many voters are angry about issues such as the cost-of-living, inflation and migration. They are also worried about the war in Ukraine.

These issues take priority over, for example, the environment. Many are distrustful of establishment or governing parties and are increasingly normalising hitherto beyond the pale, extremist elements.

Migration, climate and EU-enlargement policies

The temptation for both centre -right and -left parties will be to adopt some of these issues and incorporate several of the far-right's policies. This, more than the direct influence of the far-right parties in most national governments and the European parliament, could have an impact on the EU's direction.

Particularly migration, climate and EU-enlargement policies tend to be most affected by the centre feeling intimidated by the rise of the right.

On other issues, such as support for Ukraine and the functioning of the internal market, the centre is more likely to hold its ground.

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The most immediate example is the divergent course of the Netherlands and Belgium. In the Netherlands the centre-right has enabled the far-right PVV of Geert Wilders and is paying the price by becoming less relevant.

In Belgium the cordon sanitaire against the far-right Vlaams Belang is holding and, against expectations, that party failed to break through.

Maintaining the cordon sanitaire

In general, a patchy trend can be seen where centre-right parties who distance themselves from the extreme-right fare slightly better than the ones that try to emulate them. By the same token, centre-left parties that place themselves in clear opposition to the far-right, also seem to be faring somewhat better.

Both eastern and northern Europe diverged somewhat from the Western European picture. In the Scandinavian countries, the greens and the left did well and in the east, centrist parties in some cases successfully confronted populist nationalists.

Both the European parliament and EU's two biggest member states now face fateful decisions on maintaining the cordon sanitaire on the far-right, or incorporate these parties into the body politic.

In France, Marine Le Pen's National Rally, RN,

might well end up the biggest party in parliament after president Emmanuel Macron's decision to call legislative elections for the end of June. The RN crushed Macron's Renaissance party in the European parliament elections.

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If it repeats that feat in the national assembly, it could under France's electoral system even conceivably be able to form a government. This would make for the most awkward cohabitation ever, as Macron remains president, with wide-ranging discretionary powers, especially on foreign policy and defence.

If RN grows but falls short of a majority, however, it could cast around for a coalition partner or support for a minority government. That is when the role of France's much-reduced centre-right Les Républicains, becomes clear. At least some of its members might be tempted.

In Germany, a similar situation could emerge later this year in Thuringia, in the east of the country. The far-right AfD dominated the former East Germany in the European parliament elections, while the centre-right conservative CDU/CSU dominated the west.

State elections in three eastern states later this year, particularly in Thuringia, could see the AfD for the first time gain government responsibility, although it didn't do as well in local elections, which were also held there on 9 June, as it did in the European parliament elections.

In Germany, the CDU's Brandmauer or firewall, against the AfD for now holds, but observers say that this might change if the AfD rids itself of its more radical elements.

Whether to co-opt or isolate the far-right

The European parliament too, will confront the question of whether to co-opt or isolate the far-right. The pro-European parties, meaning the conservative EPP, the social-democrat S&D, the pro-business liberal Renew and the Greens, retain a majority, although the latter two were the biggest losers. Even so, the centre-right is reaching out to the extremes.

Despite all of her talk of the centre holding, and indeed still having a majority, von der Leyen and her EPP have already made approaches to Italy's Giorgia Meloni and her Brothers of Italy party in the hard-right ECR faction in the European parliament.

Giiorgia Meloni's trajectory shows how formerly unacceptable far-right politicians can start to move into the mainstream

EPP politicians have justified this by saying that the Brothers, who have their origins in a sometime pro-Mussolini, neo-fascist party should not be considered extreme.

Meloni's trajectory shows how formerly unacceptable far-right politicians can start to move into the mainstream. She's often said to have moderated her positions once in power, for example on Ukraine and on the EU itself.

But the real reason for her increasingly central role probably lies elsewhere. First, as leader of a crucial EU country, she cannot be easily ignored. And second, the centre-right parties see her as a role model for how to appeal to the same pool of voters that they are after.

The centre-right is doing well in, among others, Germany and Spain, less so in France and Italy.

Overall, though, it managed to increase its representation in the European parliament and it will feel more confident after these elections than the centre-left. It will also feel that it now has less reason to pay heed to centre-left and green concerns and could more often make common cause with the hard-right.