

Wake up! After these elections, Europe is again in danger

Timothy Garton Ash



Don't let anyone tell you the results are 'not so bad'. The hard-right vote can pull the entire EU to the right, and imperil Ukraine

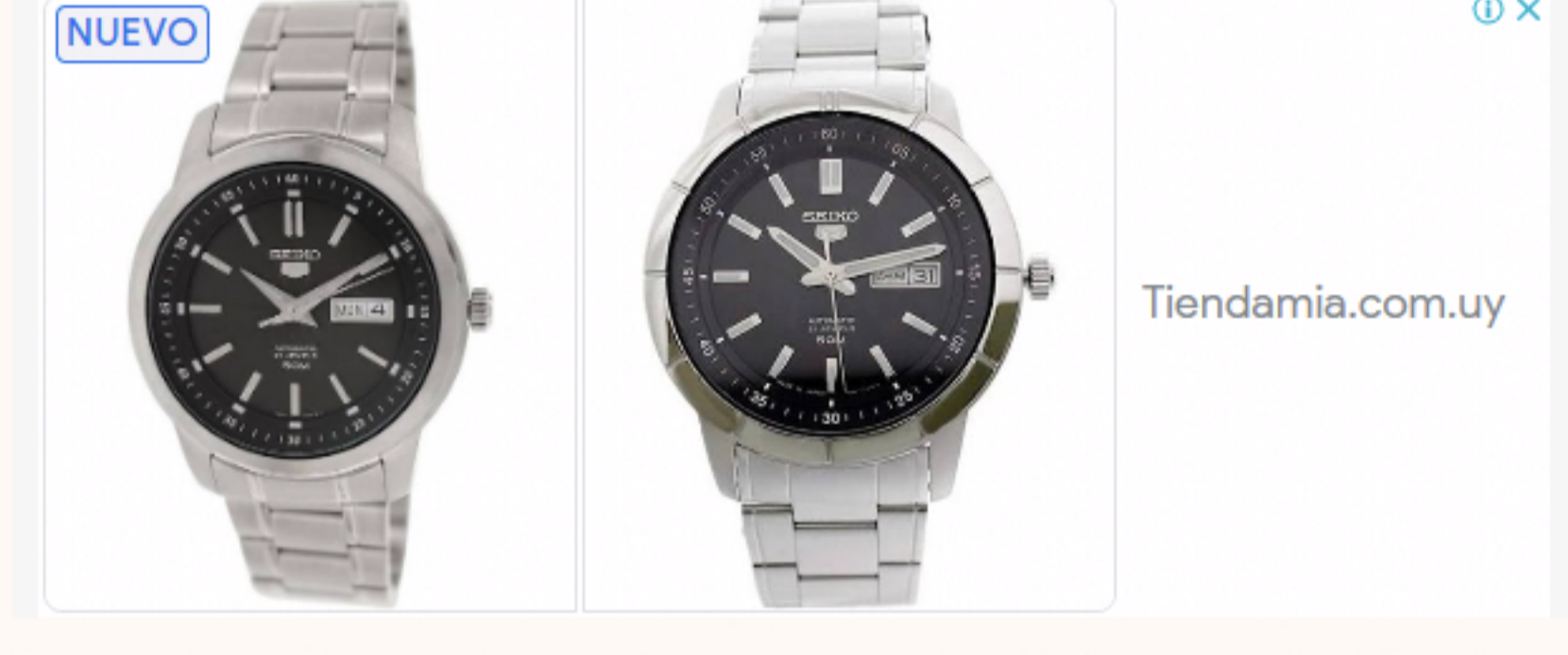


The National Rally's lead candidate Jordan Bardella with Marine Le Pen on the campaign trail in Paris on 2 June. Photograph: Vernier Jean-Bernard/JBV News/ABACA/REX/Shutterstock

A **Europe** that just celebrated on the beaches of Normandy the 80-year-old D-day beginning of its liberation from war, nationalism and fascism now again faces fascism, nationalism and war.

Please don't be reassured by European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen's complacent statement that "**the centre is holding**" during what we might call E-day - 9 June 2024, when the results of 27 different national elections to the European parliament were announced. That's true in the aggregate distribution of seats between the main party groups in the European parliament, with her own centre-right European People's party group coming out comfortably on top. But the EU is run by national governments even more than by its directly elected parliament, and E-Day produced hard-right successes in core member states that range from the significant to the shocking.

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None of these Eurosceptic parties will be so stupid as to advocate following Britain's Brexit by trying Frexit, Dexit or Nexit. Instead, they will continue to pull the EU to the right from inside, with an even harder line on immigration, determined opposition to the green measures urgently needed to address the climate crisis, reduced support for Ukraine and - nationalist as they all are - clawing back national control from Brussels. So don't let anyone tell you "it's not so bad". It's bad, and could get worse.

Most dramatic is **France**. I was in Normandy for the D-day anniversary and watched President Emmanuel Macron trying to use the international commemoration event (the one British prime minister Rishi Sunak missed) to tell an inspiring story about how that liberation paved the way for today's European Union. But in the surrounding villages I saw mainly election posters for Marine Le Pen's National Rally and heard stories of widespread support for it. Sure enough, on E-Day the National Rally scored a stunning victory, winning more than 30% of the vote and trouncing Macron's liberal centrist Renaissance. In the little town of Ver-sur-Mer, where my father landed along with so many other British soldiers to begin the liberation of western Europe on 6 June 1944, the National Rally got some 33% of the vote. Another significant chunk of votes in Ver-sur-Mer went to Marion Maréchal, Le Pen's even more extreme niece, the name of whose party, Reconquête, suggests a "reconquest" of Europe from allegedly alien and especially Muslim inhabitants, as openly advocated by its founder Éric Zemmour.

Then came the bombshell. Macron, whose always extraordinary self-confidence is now visibly tipping into hubris, announced that **he was dissolving the French parliament** and calling fresh elections on 30 June, with a second round on 7 July. "I can only salute this decision," replied Le Pen. This is a huge gamble, counting on the excellent French two-round electoral system for voters in most constituencies to prefer another candidate over the National Rally one in the decisive second round. But given the depth of popular anger, there's a serious risk that - just three days after Britain gets a government of the pragmatic, very cautiously pro-European centre-left in its election on 4 July - France may get a government of the Eurosceptic hard right, binding the hands of Macron, the continent's leading advocate of a stronger Europe. If so, this would be France's Brexit moment, although without the resulting exit.

Only slightly less worrying is Germany. While the centre-right CDU-CSU was the clear winner, the extreme-right **Alternative für Deutschland** (AfD) came second, with just under 16% of the vote, more than was garnered by any of the three parties in the country's governing coalition, including Chancellor Olaf Scholz's Social Democrats. And the AfD is a party so extreme that even Le Pen decided she did not want to be in the same European parliamentary group with it, after Maximilian Krah, its charming lead candidate, said in an interview that not all members of the SS were criminals.



Emmanuel Macron marking the 80th anniversary of the Oradour-sur-Glane massacre, south-west France. Photograph: Blondet Eliot/Abaca/Rex/Shutterstock

Meanwhile, in Italy, the Fratelli d'Italia of the country's post-neofascist prime minister Giorgia Meloni came out on top, as did the far-right Freedom party in Austria. In the Netherlands, the Party for Freedom of the Islamophobe Geert Wilders performed only slightly less well than the centre-left. Most worrying of all, many of these parties do particularly well among young voters, and especially young men. According to a survey before the election, some 36% of 18- to 24-year-olds in France backed the National Rally.

Yes, there are more encouraging results from Poland and Hungary; but if the lesson from those countries (as from Britain) is that you must actually have your populist nationalists in power for some years before they start to be rejected, that's small consolation.

Even if the hard right does not form the next French government this summer, these results will greatly complicate getting united, decisive action from the EU on issues such as the green transition. Most urgently, it will become even more difficult to make an essential upward step-change in military support for Ukraine, at a moment when that country is - let's be clear - in serious danger of eventually losing the largest war in Europe since 1945.

Although the parties of the hard right are divided over Ukraine, with Meloni currently among the embattled country's strong supporters, the net impact of these results will be negative. In Germany, roughly one quarter of the vote went to parties - of hard right (AfD), hard left (Die Linke) and a curious populist mix of the two (the Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance) - that advocate a version of "peace" that effectively means Ukrainian capitulation.

Unfortunately, Scholz's Social Democrats show clear signs of being tempted to appease these appeasers. The continental and global consequences of a victory for President Vladimir Putin's fascist Russia would bring Europe even closer to a return to its bad old days.

All of this is before we get to the most important election for Europe this year, which doesn't happen in Europe. A victory for Donald Trump in November's US presidential election would weaken and probably further divide Europe, as hard-right populist nationalists, quite possibly including Meloni, would line up as the European party of Trump.

So is it time to despair and emigrate to New Zealand? Certainly not. There's still a large majority of Europeans who don't want to lose the best Europe we've ever had. But they need to be mobilised, galvanised, persuaded that the Union really does face existential threats.

I now await with some dread the weeks of horse-trading in the EU: which party gets into bed with which other party? Who gets what top job? Fiddling in Brussels while Kharkiv and our planet burn. What we need is a combination of national governments and European institutions that between them deliver the housing young people currently cannot afford, the jobs, the life chances, the security, the green transition, the support for Ukraine. Will Europe wake up before it is too late?

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