

# Visegrad Four in the European Parliament

A REPUBLIKON INTÉZET ELEMZÉSE



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## PREVIOUS EVENTS

Twenty years ago, in 2004, the Visegrad Four joined the European Union. Since 2004, Czech, Polish, Slovak and Hungarian MEPs have been participating in the European Parliament, and this is the fifth time that the V4 countries have held European Parliament elections to enable their MEPs to win a European mandate. In 2024, for the first time, young V4 citizens who were "born into" the European Union and have lived their whole lives as members of the European community will be able to participate in the EP elections. The EP elections in the Visegrad countries are characterised by a below-average turnout, with the V4 countries' participation rates far below the EU average, despite the fact that these four countries account for 15 percent of the Members of the European Parliament. However, the past year has seen significant political upheavals in the V4 countries, which have stirred the political waters and will lead to a significant increase in EP election turnout in the Visegrad countries in 2024.

In Slovakia, the 2023 parliamentary elections have seen the return of the extremist former prime minister Robert Fico after the progressive government of Lajos Ódor. The country was rocked when Fico was assassinated by a Slovak writer on 15 May 2024, and the prime minister was hospitalised in a life-threatening condition just weeks before the 2024 EP elections. Some, including Viktor Orbán and Fico's own party, have built political communications on the panic caused by the horrific assassination attempt on the prime minister. This was the mood in which Slovak voters went to the polls in the EP elections, which ended in a victory for Progressive Slovakia, with Fico's party coming second, and a significant increase in turnout. In 2019, only 23 percent of Slovaks, the leader in terms of EP turnout, voted in the EP elections, rising to 34 percent in 2024, while the EU average remained unchanged.

The political landscape in Hungary has changed since February. Support for the governing parties, which had been weakening since 2022, felt the effects of the economic recession, and the pedophile scandal involving Katalin Novák, Judit Varga and Zoltán Balog brought a spectacular internal crisis and a further decline in popularity for Fidesz-KDNP. The governing parties then lost both their EP list leader and their President of the Republic within a week. The emergence of Péter Magyar and the TISZA party mobilised voters, reduced the opposition parties' voter base and, as a result of these events, a new EP participation record was set in Hungary on 9 June, with 60 percent of eligible voters turning out, compared to 43 percent in 2019, below the EU average.

In Poland, the October 2023 parliamentary elections brought an end to the ninth year of the Law and Justice (PiS) government and the formation of a new grand coalition government, with a record high turnout of 74 percent. Subsequently, just

six months after the national election and two months before the 2024 EP elections, Poland held municipal elections in which PiS candidates performed best, but turnout was below the previous 2018 figures. The three consecutive elections unsurprisingly demobilised Polish voters and resulted in low EP turnout in Poland, which otherwise has 53 MEPs. After 46 percent in 2019, turnout in the June EP elections fell to 41 percent in 2024, making it the only V4 member with a decline in turnout, despite Poles being the most active EP voters in general. The party alliance of Donald Tusk won the most votes, with the former governing party PiS coming second.

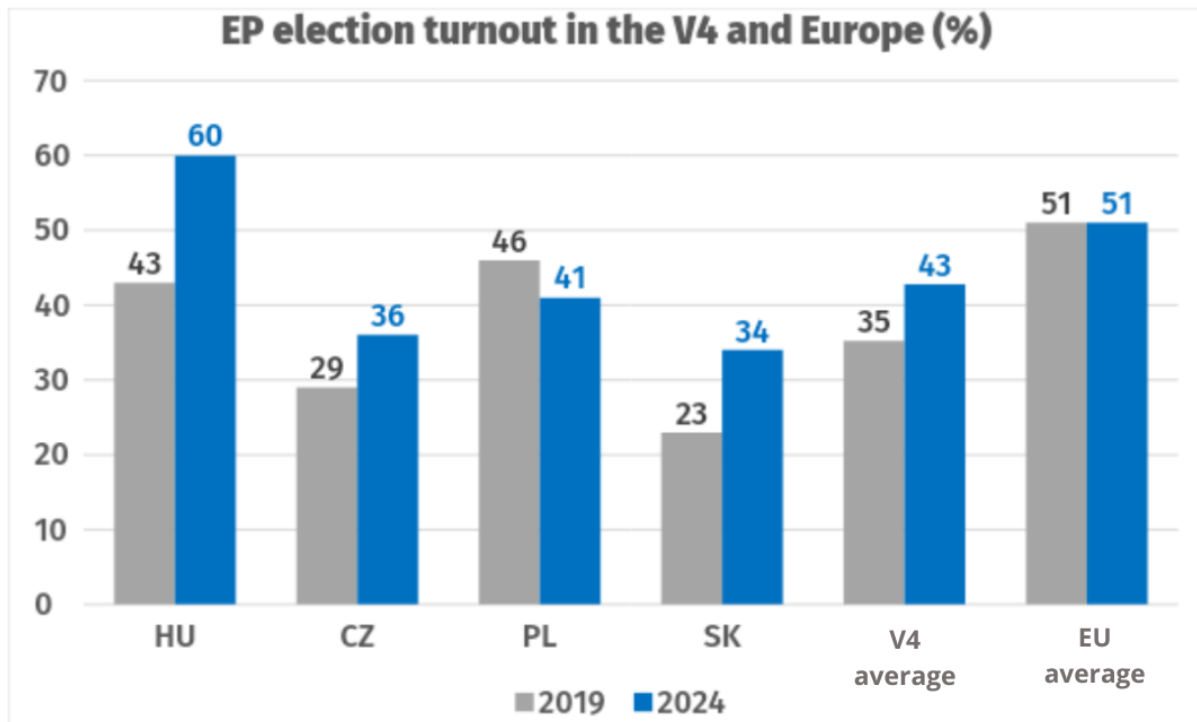


Figure 1: Election turnout trends (%)

In the Czech Republic, the five years since the 2019 EP elections have not been uneventful. In the 2021 parliamentary election, Prime Minister Andrej Babis was defeated by the opposition ODS-SPOLU electoral alliance after serving as head of government until 2017 and his party ANO having been the ruling party since 2011. The 2021 parliamentary election was the closest in Czech history and the most closely contested parliamentary election since 1998, with less than one percent difference between the top two party alliances. This was followed by municipal elections in 2022 and presidential elections in 2023. The 2023 presidential election was contested by former prime minister Andrej Babis, whose main opponent was the former chairman of NATO's Military Committee, Petr Pavel, against whom Babis was ultimately defeated. The presidential election also saw record turnout, the highest presidential turnout in the Czech Republic and the highest turnout in any Czech election since 1998. The 2024 EP elections also fit this pattern, also a record, the highest ever EP election turnout for the Czechs. The Czech Republic is

characterised by low EP turnout, with this year's 36 percent turnout not only the highest, but also the first EP turnout above 30 percent in the country.

## VISEGRAD FOUR IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

In the V4 countries, as in the EU as a whole, the right-wing is strong and was significantly strengthened in the 2024 EP elections. The moderate right-wing party family, the European People's Party, has managed to increase its number of MEPs by 9 in the incoming European Parliament, with the majority coming from Donald Tusk's new Polish government party and 7 new MEPs from the Hungarian TISZA party.

However, the V4 is sending nine fewer MEPs to Giorgia Meloni's conservative party family, the ECR, as a result of the decline of PiS, the former Polish governing party. Nevertheless, the ECR has gained strength at European level and PiS and Jarosław Kaczyński are still the dominant players in the ECR party family. The deterioration of relations between PiS and Fidesz may have contributed to Fidesz's eventual refusal to join the Conservatives. Of course, several members of the ECR would have resented Fidesz joining, primarily because of its considerable Russian influence and the resulting differences of opinion on the Russia-Ukraine war. In the end, the road to the ECR was closed to Fidesz. On 17 June Orbán and Meloni held talks, it is not known what they reached, but three days later the damage control in communication began, with faction leader Máté Kocsis stating that Fidesz was 'excluded' from joining the ECR after the Romanian AUR party was admitted, which (and the Italian press) suggests that the ECR had informally rejected Fidesz' application to join, as indicated by several signs, including Giorgia Meloni's own statements. Of course, the Romanian AUR joining the ECR should not have come as a surprise to anyone, they have been moving closer to the ECR party family for years. Just like when Fidesz was expelled from the EPP, the ruling party is now trying to frame its political failure as its own decision and ultimate success.

## EP seats held by V4 countries in 2019 and 2024

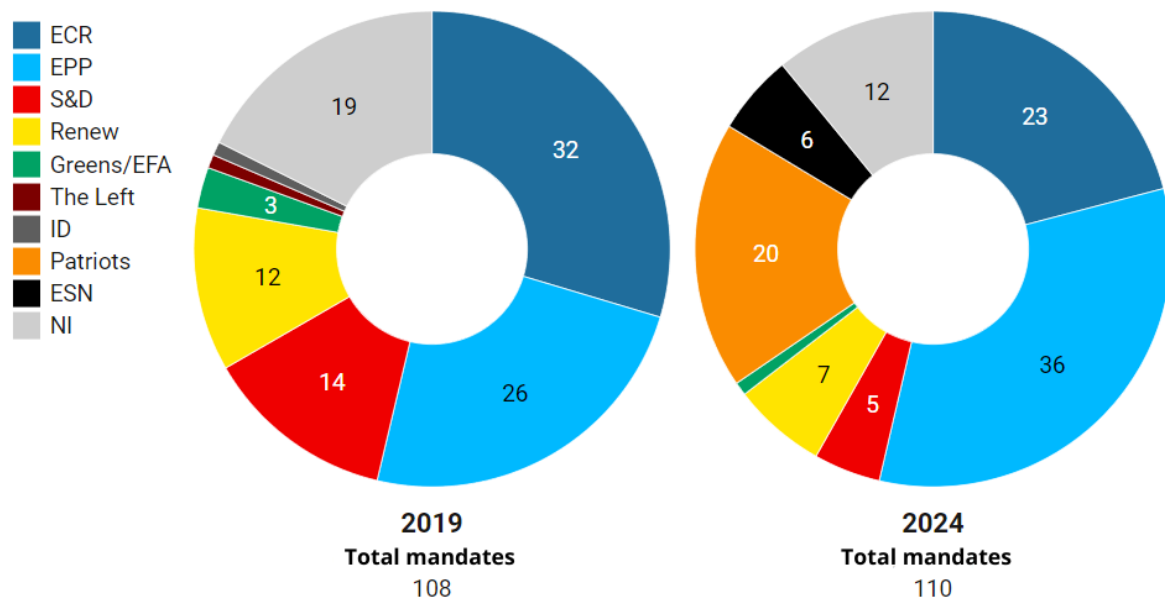


Figure 2: V4 countries MEPs by political group

The right-wing advance has also brought with it two new right-wing party families, the Patriots and the Sovereigns, with 84 and 25 MEPs respectively.

Although both party alliances are extremist, the Sovereigns (ESN) are indeed drawn from Europe's most extremist and Putinist parties. The majority of its members are from the German AfD party, which was expelled from the far-right ID before the elections after its senior politicians got into trouble for Russian and Chinese influence. They are joined by the only MEP from Mi Hazánk, as well as three Polish MEPs and one each from the Czech Republic and Slovakia. In total, 6 MEPs from the V4 will join the political group, more than the much larger Socialist group.

After the elections, many analysts came to the same two conclusions: first, that Viktor Orbán and Fidesz remain outside the majority decision-making process in the EP, and second, that Viktor Orbán has become isolated on the European stage. The formation of the Patriots contradicts the latter, as the new party family formed at the initiative of Fidesz is the third largest alliance in the EP, and even if it is a Le Pen-centred construction, no one can deny Viktor Orbán's role in organising the Patriots. The V4 countries make up a quarter of the Patriots group, with 11 Fidesz-KDNP and 9 ANO MEPs. Former Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babis' party left the liberal Renew faction and announced its new political group a few days later. While Renew members were not without precedent for the departure of ANO, the public was caught off guard by the Patriots' ability to siphon MPs from the Liberal caucus.

The liberal Renew group had until recently included 12 V4 MEPs and it looked as if the good showing of the Czech ANO party would add two more to Renew, but on 21 June Andrej Babis announced that ANO was leaving Renew, leaving just 7 MEPs from the V4 in the liberal political group. Although Renew's president Valérie Hayer said ANO's departure was "long overdue", it is another loss for European liberals who had wanted to retain their position as the third largest EP political group; instead they have slipped back to fifth place. The socialist S&D family will have a third as many MEPs from the V4 as before, after the DK-MSZP-P alliance in Hungary lost three MEPs, the Polish left lost four and no politicians from Slovakia or the Czech Republic will join the S&D group. The V4 Green parties have fared similarly badly, with the Visegrad Four giving one MEP to the Greens/EFA family of EP Green and Pirate parties instead of three, and the Czech Pirate party (Piráti) was the only V4 Greens/EFA member of the outgoing European Parliament, with only one MEP in the EP from 2024.

### V4 seats in the EP by country, 2019-2024

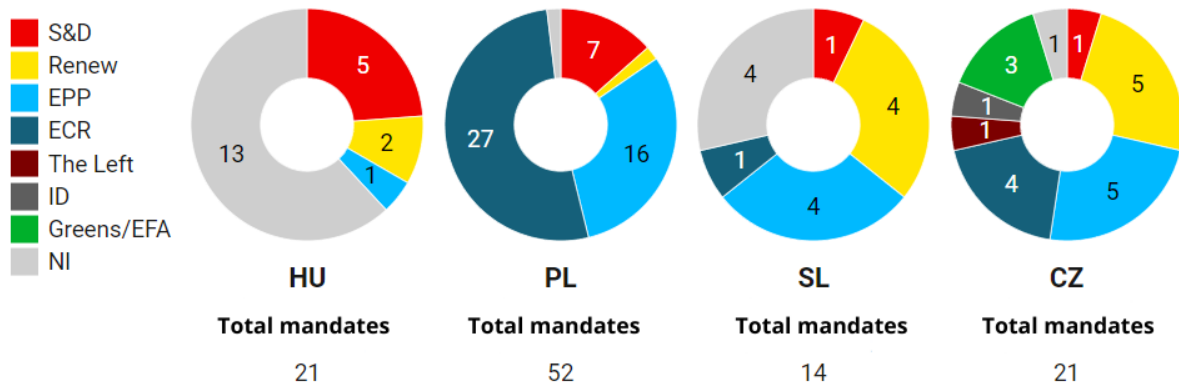


Figure 3: Outgoing V4 MEPs by country

## V4 seats in the EP by country, 2024-2029

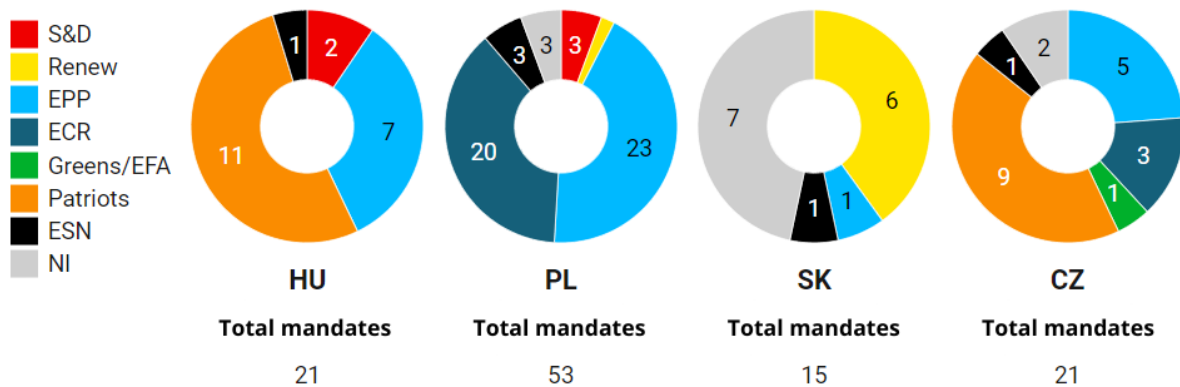


Figure 4: Members of the new European Parliament by V4 country

The image of the European Parliament has changed significantly as a result of the 2024 European elections, as can be seen from the V4 results. Across Europe, the far-right performed well in the elections, with France, Austria and Germany among the countries beyond the Visegrad countries where the far-right was strong. It is questionable to what extent we can speak of a far-right advance in the Visegrad countries. In the V4, the otherwise centrist EPP has been able to gain strength, thanks to Donald Tusk's party alliance and members of the TISZA party, while the ECR has fewer V4 MEPs than in 2019, precisely because Tusk's *Coalicja Obywatelska* won the Polish EP elections against PiS, the otherwise socialist Robert Fico was left without a party family and was overtaken in the election by the Slovak progressives, and Fidesz lost two seats after its worst EP performance ever, and along with the KDNP, which had just left the People's Party, looked for a long time as if it might be left without a political group. In Western Europe, the far right has made proportionately greater breakthroughs than in the Visegrad countries. However, the formation of the Patriots is a major far-right achievement, even if it also caused the demise of another extremist group, ID, which, thanks to the previously liberal ANO and Fidesz-KDNP parties, now has 20 MEPs from the V4 and is the third largest EP group.

Despite this, it is not expected that the current moderate coalition dominated by the People's Party will be replaced by a more extreme political grouping, including Viktor Orbán and Fidesz, which will determine the mainstream of EU politics. It is difficult to proclaim the "advance" of the far right in the European Parliament if a majority is formed against them in the EP. The term *cordon sanitaire* is used to describe the phenomenon where a political grouping representing a significant power is completely excluded from the exercise of power by the majority. The EP's first decisions suggest that this is what happened to the two new extremist party families, the Patriots of Fidesz and the *Mi Hazánk* ESN faction. If a political group is



strong in the EP, it can be a contender for a number of European positions, but none of the candidates from the extremist party families have been elected, the most striking example being that the third largest EP group has not been elected as EP vice-president out of 14. The opposition parties in the V4, whether it is TISZA in the EPP or Progressive Slovakia in Renew, are therefore closer to decision-making and thus to positions than the countries' governing parties, the independent SMER in the EP or Fidesz-KDNP.

The outcome could also influence the future of V4 cooperation. For years Fidesz has been able to rely on good Hungarian-Polish relations, but on the one hand the Polish PiS government was toppled in 2023, and on the other hand Fidesz-PiS relations are not what they used to be. PiS sits in the ECR, where Fidesz has no seat, and their positions on Ukraine are not compatible. In the Czech Republic, the Orbán government has not developed friendly relations with the previous or the current government, although Andrej Babis has recently become closer and the formation of the Patriots has turned the tables. However, his newest Czech ally, Babis's ANO, remains in opposition in the Czech Republic and just left Renew, which was his only link to EP decision-making. If Fidesz had been admitted to the ECR, it would have been in the same party family as SPOLU, one of the Czech government parties, but this has not happened. In the V4, the socialist Robert Fico was for a time Viktor Orbán's closest ally in the V4, and managed to form a government in 2023, but was defeated in the 2024 EP elections by Progressive Slovakia, which did nearly 10 percent better in the EP elections than in the 2023 parliamentary election. For reasons that are not fully clear, Fico's party was not included in the Patriots faction and will remain independent.

Even if Viktor Orbán is not alone in Europe, by organising the Patriots he has finally accepted his own far-rightism. By recruiting the openly Nazi-sympathetic Czech 'bikers' or the Flemish Interest, he has chosen a table for himself that the majority of the European right will not accept. Le Pen could be the leading figure in the group, as her party brings the most MEPs to the Patriots. Even though the MKB bank financed Le Pen's campaign a few years ago, and even though Le Pen's party was defeated in the French mid-term elections (the left-wing coalition is currently trying to agree on a new prime minister), Le Pen, despite her failures, has 'outgrown' Orbán on the European stage, and could also dominate the faction formed by the Hungarian prime minister from him. If this succeeds, we must not forget that the faction is supposed to include patriots from different European countries, it is hard to imagine that national interests would not clash between, say, France and Hungary, and lead to sharp divisions within the Patriots.

The formation of the Patriots is a significant political success, but it does not change the fact that Fidesz-KDNP has gone from being in the strongest political group in Europe to a minority in a few years, to an extremist political group, which is far from

the mainstream of European politics and thus far from important positions. Of course, this is not in the interests of any Hungarian citizen. Even if the Fidesz government does not find its place in the V4 cooperation, after the left-wing and liberal parties in the V4 countries and the opposition to Orbán and Fico have gained positions in the EP; even if Fidesz MEPs do not stand during the playing of the EU anthem and the Fidesz-KDNP is excluded from European decision-making, we can hope that the Orbán government will continue to think in Europe, despite all the setbacks.

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