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# **EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION 2019: ASSESSMENT AND FUTURE OUTLOOK**

**STRATEGIC**

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## ASSESSMENT AND FUTURE OUTLOOK

**SPECIAL REPORT**

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## Author



**Yasemin Zeisl** is a Risk Analyst at Global Risk Intelligence. She earned her MSc in International Relations and Affairs from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). She is currently based in Austria.

## List of Abbreviations:

<b><i>AFD</i></b>	<b>Alternative for Germany</b>
<b><i>ALDE</i></b>	<b>Alliance for Liberals and Democrats for Europe</b>
<b><i>CDU</i></b>	<b>Christian Democratic Union of Germany</b>
<b><i>ECR</i></b>	<b>European Conservatives and Reformists</b>
<b><i>EPP</i></b>	<b>European People's Party</b>
<b><i>EFDD</i></b>	<b>Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy</b>
<b><i>ENF</i></b>	<b>Europe of Nations and Freedom</b>
<b><i>EP</i></b>	<b>European Parliament</b>
<b><i>ETS</i></b>	<b>Emissions Trading System</b>
<b><i>EU</i></b>	<b>European Union</b>
<b><i>FPÖ</i></b>	<b>Freedom Party</b>
<b><i>ÖVP</i></b>	<b>People's Party of Austria</b>
<b><i>S&amp;D</i></b>	<b>Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats</b>
<b><i>SPÖ</i></b>	<b>Social Democratic Party</b>
<b><i>UK</i></b>	<b>United Kingdom</b>

**BOLTS: STRATEGIC.**

**TAGS: EUROPE, EP, EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, EU, EUROPEAN UNION, ELECTIONS, ENERGY, DEMOCRACY, TRADE, INTERNATIONAL TRADE, SECURITY, ULTRANATIONALISM.**

## The European Union in the World

A number of hardships have preceded the European Parliament (EP) Election of 2019, which includes the migration crisis peaking in 2015, the United Kingdom (UK)'s Brexit referendum in 2017, and a series of terror attacks on European cities. Strongly interconnected with these events is the rise of nationalism and right-wing populism in counties across the continent. Member states of the European Union (EU) were standing at a pivotal point when EU citizens walked to polling stations between May 23 and May 26, 2019 to define the future of the Europe in the EP election.



The EP is the only directly elected body of the EU and determines the lives of approximately 500 million people. The EU is the biggest trading block in the world and is leader in export shares of industrial products globally<sup>1</sup>. Core values of the EU are durable peace, democracy, the rule of law, human rights, economic strength and prosperity, international cooperation and diplomacy, humanitarian action, mobility, and equality<sup>2</sup>. The block currently encompasses 28 states<sup>3</sup> and is a stronghold of western liberalism. Crises in recent years, however, have fragmented European unity and raised concerns over where the EU might be headed after the parliament election in May 2019 and the departure of the UK from the EU.

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<sup>1</sup> **European Union (2019): *Trade*. Available at: [https://europa.eu/european-union/topics/trade\\_en](https://europa.eu/european-union/topics/trade_en) (Accessed: June 1, 2019).**

<sup>2</sup> **See European Union (2019): *The EU in brief*. Available at: [https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/eu-in-brief\\_en](https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/eu-in-brief_en) (Accessed: June 1, 2019).**

<sup>3</sup> **Until the foreseeable departure of the United Kingdom from the EU by October 31, 2019.**

## Election Results

A shift in European voter opinion was expected ahead of the election and the results affirm these forecasts. The two largest parties in the EP, the center-right European People's Party (EPP) and the center-left Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), have suffered substantial losses. Voters have instead supported Eurosceptic, right-wing parties as well as environmentalist Green parties.

European countries like France, Italy, and the UK predominantly backed right-wing factions in the EP. The right-wing Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) party came in first place in France and Italy while the right-wing Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) party took the pole position in the UK. Similarly, Poland was also dominated by the Eurosceptic European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) party. In stark contrast, Spain and Portugal are proponents of the center-left S&D. The liberal, pro-European Alliance for Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) party proved particularly popular in the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, Belgium, and Estonia. The ALDE was also the strongest rival of the ENF in France, gaining almost as many seats as the ENF. European



countries such as Germany, Sweden, Ireland, Hungary, Austria or Romania adhere to the conservative EPP, the strongest party in the parliament.

Out of the 751 total seats in the EP, the EPP has gained the most seats, followed by the S&D, and

the ALDE. The subsequent chart (Figure 1) illustrates the distribution of seats in the EP, according to preliminary results published by the European Parliament<sup>4</sup>. The seat distribution among member

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<sup>4</sup> European Parliament (2019): *2019 European election results*. Available at: <https://www.election-results.eu/> (Accessed: June 4, 2019).

states is digressively proportional with the population size. The top five countries holding the most seats in the Parliament and, hence, possessing the greatest decision-making power are Germany (96 seats), France (74 seats), the UK (73 seats), Italy (73 seats), and Spain (54 seats).

## Voter Turnout

Low voter participation in the election has plagued the EU in the past. This may stem from a lacking understanding of EU bureaucracy, which is a complex net of committees, reports, procedures, and institutions. During the first European Parliament elections in 1979, voter turnout was not particularly high. Ever since, this situation has not changed significantly until the elections in 2019. In 2014, merely 43% of eligible EU citizens cast a ballot. Voter turnout was especially low among younger EU member states in eastern Europe such as Slovenia, Slovakia, Croatia, or Bulgaria, averaging a voter participation of below 30%<sup>5</sup>. In 2019, however, voter turnout reached its first record high since 1994, with 51% of EU citizens voicing their opinion in the EP election<sup>6</sup>.

Potential reasons for this increased interest in EU politics are the rise of right-wing parties and Euroscepticism across the continent. It appeared that right-wing parties in Europe had gained sufficient traction to challenge the long-established dominance of Christian conservatives and social democrats. Media attention had largely focused on this subject of contention, which presumably stayed in the minds of voters. This divergence from common patterns is what likely moved proponents of either camp to show support for their preferred party through a vote.

At the same time, environmental issues and global warming have been circulating relatively frequently in the public discourse, demanding the attention of EU citizens. At the same time, campaigns calling on Europeans – especially young voters – to go to polling stations in order to

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<sup>5</sup> Saeed, Saim (2019): *The elections that will decide Europe's future: Why voters should take them seriously*, *Foreign Affairs*. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/2019-05-23/elections-will-decide-europes-future> (Accessed: May 31, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Charlemagne (2019): *Populists fall short of expectations in the European elections*, *The Economist*. Available at: <https://www.economist.com/charlemagnes-notebook/2019/05/26/populists-fall-short-of-expectations-in-the-european-elections> (Accessed: May 30, 2019).



increase voter turnout have populated the media. The campaign “This time I’m voting” was one of such initiatives<sup>7</sup>. These factors appear to have triggered greater voter turnout in 2019.

## Right-Wing Party Performance

Right-wing parties have achieved the best result in the EP election thus far. Yet in spite of their gains, Eurosceptic, right-wing parties did not achieve the immense surge in votes that Europe had anticipated ahead of the election. Right-wing parties resort to a populist rhetoric of European fragmentation, anti-immigration, and nationalism. While right-wing parties have underperformed during the election, it is their goal to consolidate power now and strengthen their values in European politics. Months before May 2019, politicians warned of such nationalist sentiment and populist political agendas disintegrating European unity. It is not right-wing parties, however, that have caused a fragmentation of European politics but rather diverging voter opinion on which party to support.

In the run-up to the election, one event that shocked Europe was the Ibiza affair involving two leading members of the right-wing Freedom Party (FPÖ) in Austria. Former FPÖ leader and vice chancellor of Austria, Heinz-Christian Strache, and former FPÖ deputy leader, Johann Gudenus, were secretly



filmed as they offered a woman pretending to be the niece of a Russian oligarch government contracts in return for favorable news coverage. Close relations with Russia and the corrupt behavior of the FPÖ alarmed Europe and may have influenced the result of the election; however, the impact of this scandal is difficult to measure quantitatively across Europe. After the affair, the

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<sup>7</sup> European Union (2019): “*This time I’m voting*” campaign. Available at: <https://www.thistimeimvoting.eu/> (Accessed: May 30, 2019).

conservative People's Party of Austria (ÖVP) gained popularity, whereas the popularity of the FPÖ suffered. The ÖVP and the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) eventually gained the most trust of Austrian voters during the EP election as they remained the country's two leading parties. The FPÖ came in third place, adding 3 seats to right-wing factions in the EP. Given Austria's small size and contribution of only 18 seats to the EP, the shuffle in domestic politics following the Ibiza affair did not significantly impact the number of seats that the FPÖ expected to win.

France's National Rally under Marine Le Pen and Italy's Five Star League under Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini have made the greatest gains for Eurosceptics in the election. French politician Marine Le Pen had already acquired strong media presence in Europe when she ran for President in 2017 but eventually had to admit defeat against centrist, pro-EU President Emmanuel Macron. Poland's Law and Justice, the country's leading party, also proved its popularity among the Polish people, coming in first place. Ongoing arguments about how to realize the departure of the UK from the EU, commonly known as Brexit, have hampered suitable solutions in the British parliament. British people had become increasingly frustrated with the performance of former British Prime Minister Theresa May and the Conservative Unionist Party. As a consequence, voters flocked to Nigel Farage's Brexit Party, a Eurosceptic party that pursues a hard-lined Brexit approach. In contrast, right-wing parties in Germany or Spain could not convince voters. Spain's Vox and the Alternative for Germany (AFD) only achieved 6.2% and 11%, respectively.

A challenge right-wing parties need to anticipate in the long-term is their rhetoric. A cornerstone of their political agenda is reducing the migrant flow into Europe. Stigmatizing immigration as threat to European security, right-wing politicians will have to address the fact the total number of immigrants from the Middle East and Africa is receding. The migrant flow reached its pinnacle in 2015 but has subsided ever since. Italy's Deputy Prime Minister Salvini has effectively halted immigration through Italy's ports by 98% and this will render future campaigns based on a continuing migrant influx unsubstantiated<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, right-wing populism may have potentially passed its zenith.

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<sup>8</sup> Surotchak, J. & Twining, D. (2019): Europe is ripe for a return to establishment politics, *Foreign Policy*. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/05/23/europe-is-ripe-for-a-return-to-establishment-politics/> (Accessed: May 30, 2019).

## Gains for Liberals and The Greens

Other than right-wing parties, liberals and The Greens were victors of the election. The pro-European ALDE and The Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA) gained 38 and 24 additional seats respectively. The ALDE is now the third strongest party in the parliament with 105 seats while The Greens come in fourth place with a total of 74 seats. In contrast, the EPP lost 42 seats and the S&D lost 38 seats. The ALDE won over voters particularly in France and the UK, finishing the election



as second most voted for party. This is an interesting development, demonstrating that these countries experience a major rivalry between right-wing and left-wing politics.

Germany was dominated by The Greens, which are now the second most represented party after the EPP. This lack of right-wing strength in Germany may be surprising to some, but the diverging opinion of German citizens compared to other European voters may seem less puzzling when considering that Germany and Chancellor Angela Merkel are often regarded as guiding figures in pro-Europeanism. This fact is relevant because Germany possesses the most seats in the EP and can dictate EU politics to a large extent. The root of Germany's political orientation lies in its past. After the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Germany had to prove European neighbors that it would not assume the role of the aggressor again as it had during the Second World War. As a consequence, European integration became a key element of German foreign policy. Incumbent

Chancellor Merkel is Germany's current defender of EU multilateralism. In late 2018, however, Merkel transferred leadership of the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU) and announced that she would retire from politics after the end of her term in office in 2021. According to estimates, Merkel's successor in the CDU, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, may take her place as Germany's leader after 2021. The future of Germany's politics is highly relevant to the EU's unity. Therefore, it is important to monitor forthcoming developments in Germany's political landscape.

## Future Prospects

The results of the EP election have led to a regrouped distribution of power among parties in the parliament. The EPP and S&D have lost their majority and significant decision-making power. Issues are more likely to be resolved on a case-by-case basis. Decisions emerging from the informal grand coalition between the EPP and the S&D are now expected to include more parties. The key point policymakers need to anticipate in future decision-making processes is the greater fragmentation of political positions in the EP in the new legislative session. This rearrangement of power will be a vital challenge for the EP in the future.

## Energy Policy

Green energy and carbon-free economic growth have been on the EU agenda even before the election, but now that environmentalists in the EP have gained more decision-making power, they may be able to advance green and renewable energy projects in the future. One of these projects is the *EU Clean Energy Package* which aims for a more environment-focused, sustainable energy supply in accordance with the *Paris Agreement* on green energy and climate change. The package encompasses energy performance in buildings, energy efficiency, governance regulation,

electricity market design, and non-legislative initiatives such as coal regions in transition, clean energy for EU islands, and energy poverty monitoring in Europe<sup>9</sup>.

Another project is the *EU Emissions Trading System (ETS)* which addresses carbon taxation and carbon pricing<sup>10</sup>. The ETS aims to cover 45% of all greenhouse gas emissions in the EU and regulate the emissions of approximately 11,000 energy intensive facilities and airline companies. Including all 28 EU member states as well as Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway, the ETS is an extensive project that will reach its final implementation stage by 2030. Based on a cap and trade system, the ETS limits the total amount of emissions a facility is allowed to produce. Over time, the allowed maximum of emissions is gradually reduced. Facilities are permitted to trade emission allowances among each other.

## President of the European Commission and Leaders in the European Union

In the coming weeks and months, successors for leading positions need to be appointed. These positions are the President of the European Parliament (currently held by Antonio Tajani), the President of the European Council (currently held by Donald Tusk), the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (currently held by Frederica Mogherini), and the President of the European Central Bank (currently held by Mario Draghi).

A key position in the EU is that of the President of the European Commission (currently held by Jean-Claude Juncker). The importance of the role for the EU can be compared to that of a head of state. The President of the European Commission appoints one Commissioner for each of the EU member states. The Commission can be compared to the cabinet of a government. Candidates for the role of the President of the European Commission require the approval of the majority on the EP, which comprises half of the existing members of the EP plus one.

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<sup>9</sup> **European Commission (n.d.): *Clean energy for all Europeans*. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/energy/en/topics/energy-strategy-and-energy-union/clean-energy-all-europeans> (Accessed: June 2, 2019).**

<sup>10</sup> **European Commission (n.d.): *EU Emissions Trading System (EU ETS)*. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/clima/policies/ets\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/clima/policies/ets_en) (Accessed: June 2, 2019).**

A new method to appoint the President of the European Commission has been a subject of discussion. This so-called *Spitzenkandidaten* system (lead candidate system) would grant preference to the favored candidate of the strongest EP party. In this case, the EPP's leading candidate would assume Jean-Claude Juncker's position. Opponents of this system such as French President Macron, however, have been vocal about appointing a candidate based on performance and skill rather than on party-based affiliation. The EPP's preferred candidate is Manfred Weber, who

struggles to gain widespread approval among citizens and politicians. A candidate with chances of winning may be Michel Barnier who serves as European Chief Negotiator for the UK's exit from the EU since 2016. Barnier is affiliated with the EPP. Another likely future President could be



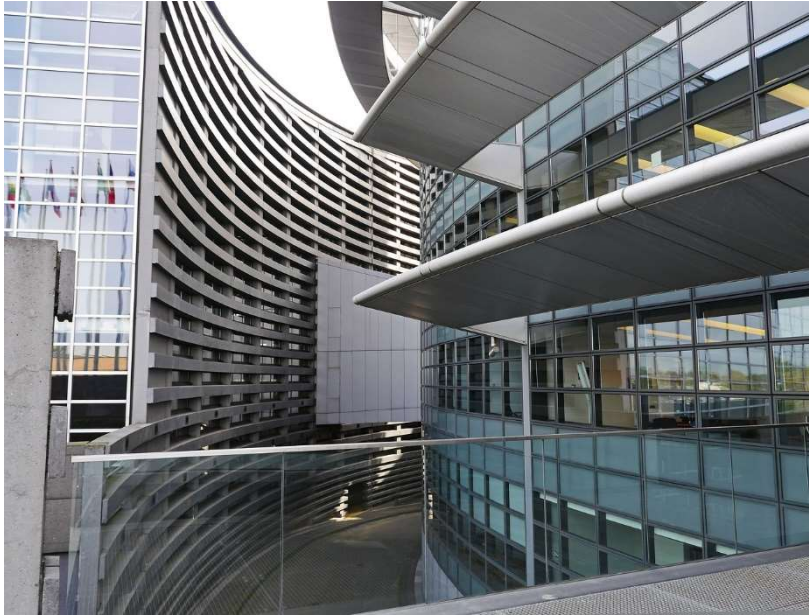
Margrethe Vestager who serves as the European Commissioner for Competition since 2014. From 2007 to 2014, Vestager was the leader of Denmark's Social Liberal Party, which is represented by the ALDE in the EP.

## The Impact of Brexit on the European Parliament

When the UK vacates the EP after Brexit, which is expected to take place by October 31, 2019, the UK's allotted 73 seats will have to be re-distributed before the 2024 EP election. The EP reportedly plans to reduce the total number of seats from 751 to 705 after Brexit. 46 of these vacated seats

may be available for a potential EU enlargement in the future. The remaining 27 of these 73 seats are expected to be divided among 14 under-represented EU member states<sup>11</sup>.

Another factor relating to Brexit that needs to be addressed is the future of English as an official EU



language. English may cease to remain an official EU language, as the UK was the only country to propose English as official language. Ireland suggested Gaelic and Malta suggested Maltese. As a result of this, Germany may gain greater relevance as an official EU language instead. In an alternative scenario, English remains a primary EU language

out of practical reason. This is because a change in the EU language agreements would have to be approved by a unanimous vote of the European Council and the President of the European Commission.

## Conclusion

The outcome of the election suggests that the EP will be more susceptible to arguments among members of different parties. The reason for this lies in a more balanced distribution of power. The loss of power for the ruling EPP and S&D and the gain of power for the ALDE, the Greens, and right-wing parties will foreseeably complicate consent in the course of decision-making processes in the EP.

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<sup>11</sup> European Parliament (2018): *Number of MEPs to be reduced after EU elections in 2019*. Available at: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20180607IPR05241/number-of-meps-to-be-reduced-after-eu-elections-in-2019> (Accessed: June 1, 2019).

Statements by Chancellor Merkel and President Macron about the importance of climate change, carbon-free energy and sustainability, and innovation and economic development are reconfirmed by the results of the election. Such projects will be important in order to maintain the strength and relevance of the EU within the international community. In turn, social and economic prosperity would likely reinforce European unity. States with poor economic development and high debt such as Greece or Italy tend to display a lower identification with Europe<sup>12</sup>. Surprisingly, identification with Europe is also relatively low in well-situated France<sup>13</sup>. Domestic politics, national identity, and right-wing popularity in France could correlate with this result. This is a major challenge for pro-Europe, reformist President Macron.

Another step that the EU plans to take is filling more positions with women. The coming weeks and months will show whether such a goal can be achieved as successors for leading roles in the EU are elected. This process could continue until late 2019.

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<sup>12</sup> Ciaglia, S., Fuest, C. & Heinemann, F. (2018): Europäische Identität: Begriff, Determinanten und Politikansätze, *Wirtschaftsdienst* 98(12), p.871.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.



## Figures

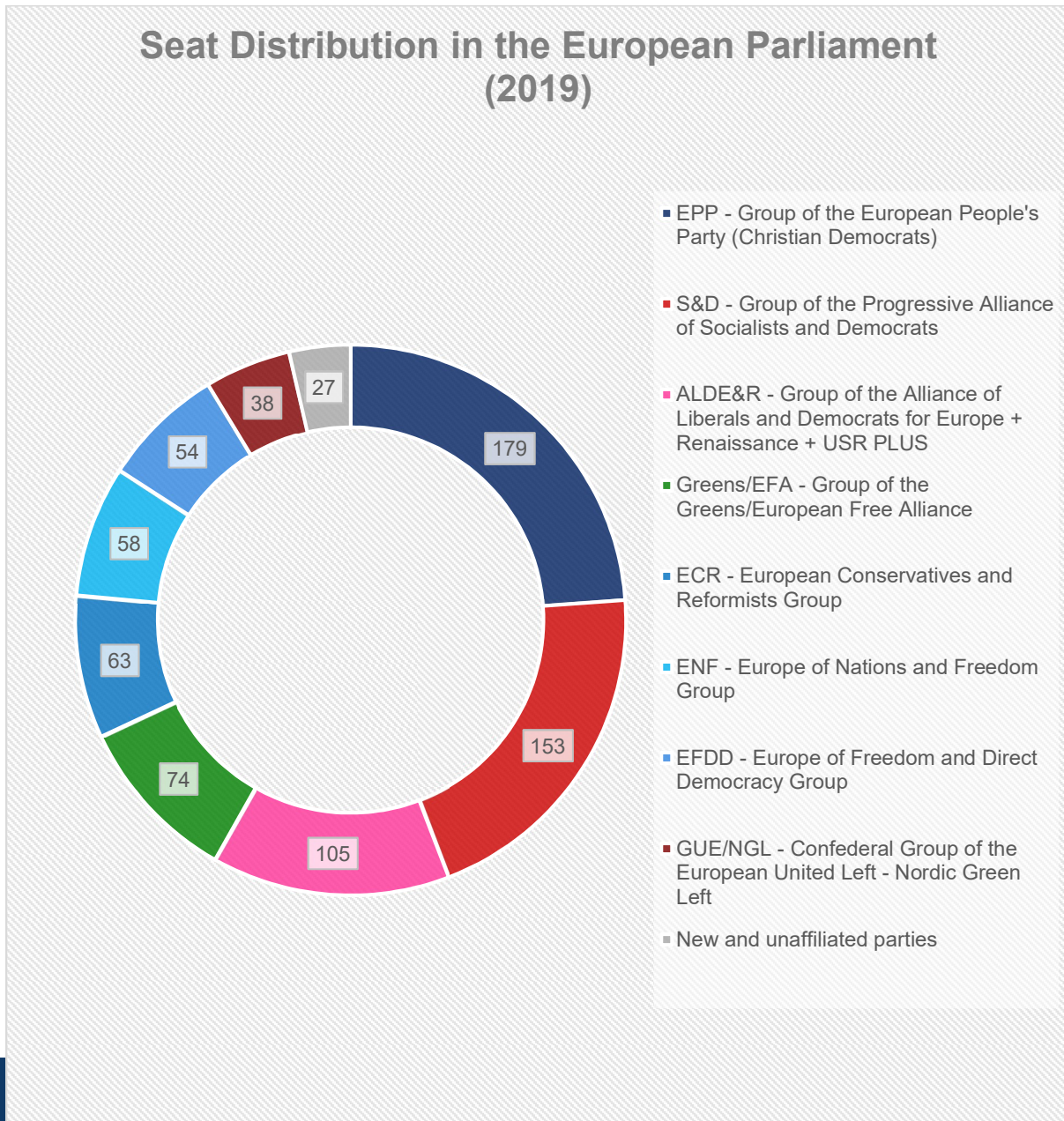


Figure 1: Seat Distribution in the European Parliament (2019). (Image Credit: Global Risk Intelligence).



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