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UNIVERSITY OF  
TORONTO

The European  
Studies Students'  
Association ©  
2024 2025

# Messages in the Media

2024 | YEAR IN REVIEW

Media-driven insights on  
Europe and democracy



A MESSAGE FROM THE  
CENTRE FOR EUROPEAN  
AND EURASIAN STUDIES

University of Toronto

I am amazed when I think that this is 12th Edition of *Messages in the Media*! I remember well when this dynamic journal took off and it continues to thrive. While its template remains the same, media driven insights on Europe and democracy, this year's edition is special. It has analysis of European parliamentary elections and 2024 was a year of extraordinary change as the assumptions we had about Europe and post-Second World War order gradually disappeared. This unravelling continued into 2025 as even more of our assumptions were completely thrown out the window. Turning point, inflection point or end of an era? Who knows? But read on as the essays that follow provide answers based on serious research into country-specific national media. It is an easy and accessible way to get a picture of Europe. These short pieces of analysis offer an extraordinary amount of information.

The Journal is also more than that. It is a totally student driven initiative that delivers incredible results. It is outgrowth of the Munk School's European Affairs Program and the European Studies Students' Association. I have been engaged with both since the beginning and few things give me more pleasure than to watch students, driven by a passion for Europe (and its languages!), come together like this and use the language skills that they have worked so hard to gain and maintain. We are all very proud of our "boutique" program that has always punched way above its weight in terms of student initiatives and engagement.

I congratulate the leadership, the editors and the writers.  
*To our readers: Enjoy and be sure to send feedback.*

**Robert C. Austin, PhD**

Professor and Associate Director, CEEES,  
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**Dear Readers,**

The European Studies Students' Association is proud to publish the 12th edition of our annual journal, *Messages in the Media*. Since 2012, the journal has provided country reports and analyses of major political and socioeconomic developments affecting Europe and Eurasia, with specific attention to the media portrayal of these issues.

This year, common themes in many of these country reports include reactions to the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, EU parliamentary and national elections.

Throughout 2024, we have seen a multitude of reactions to wider geopolitical tensions while simultaneously addressing domestic issues. The ongoing war in Ukraine has prompted many EU member states to re-evaluate their relationships with Russia and the EU. For many cases, countries have made considerable effort to phase out dependency on Russian energy, albeit with consequential setbacks to the European Green Deal.

Over the summer, the European Parliament held its tenth parliamentary election, which resulted in the European People's Party (EPP) remaining the largest group in parliament and another term for Ursula von der Leyen. From June 6th to 9th, approximately 50.74% of eligible voters went to the polls—a record high since 1994.

**MITM | Letter from the Editors**

This election also signalled the increase of right-wing seats alongside a decline in the left. Beyond the EU, several countries held general elections, including Austria, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. The coinciding of EU and general elections have challenged this year's analysts to address these elections where applicable.

We would like to extend our sincere gratitude to our 33 analysts this year for providing in-depth and sophisticated analyses of each country and its media landscape. Their diligent and hard work contributed greatly to the smooth process of this year's production. We also want to thank our graphic designer, Eno Ma for creating the beautiful design and layout.

Most importantly, we would like to thank our editors for guiding our analysts and providing feedback to their work. This year, we have seen some of the most dedicated editors who truly cared about improving the writing skills of the analysts.

To our readers, we hope that you enjoy this year's journal and we invite you to join next year's edition!



**Jacqueline Liu**  
Editor-in-Chief



**Ana Grace Rans Kolakovic**  
Editor-in-Chief

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Leora Kasneci

# Albania

Population  
Unemployment Rate  
GDP Per Capita  
EU Status

3,107,100  
11.58% (2023)  
8,368 USD  
EU Accession

## ALBANIA

Leora Kasneci

### Introduction

Critical developments in Albania have considerably rattled its internal affairs and external relations. As of 2024, Albania faces political and bureaucratic obstacles despite substantial progress in accession negotiations, being one of nine prospective candidates to affirm its membership in the European Union (EU). These challenges, political corruption, civil unrest, and human rights violations demarcate and undermine progress in Albania's EU status, creating a conflict between prioritizing foreign relations and maintaining state and civil legitimacy. First, political corruption, as indicated by international agencies, reduces the power of legal efficacy and consistency seen in the principle of the rule of law. Second, mass political tensions from this corruption promotes civil unrest, culminating in urbanized protests and demonstrations that can easily escalate when Policia e Shtetit (Albanian State Police) try to diffuse crowds. Third, the Roma populations in Albania are faced with discriminatory policies that undermine their basic human rights. These rights include legal identity, *jus soli* (birthright citizenship), and access to crucial socializing institutions such as education and

healthcare. These interconnected issues define Albania's trajectory and will likely influence its stability and development in the coming years. Given the current condition of Albania's domestic landscape, there must be an emphasis on reforming structural and institutional shortcomings from the inside out. Otherwise, the nation risks losing its external sovereignty from outside influence.

### EU Accession Negotiations

This year, Albania's pursuits of EU membership reached a significant milestone. On October 15, Albania officially commenced negotiations during the Second Accession Conference in Luxembourg, which began conversations directed at the nation's institutions and policy to ensure alignment with EU standards. This is a decade after the EU granted Albania official candidate status, including years of preliminary procedures, and the signing of formal initiations of accession talks in 2022. In 2024, Albania passed several reforms that demonstrate its willingness to cooperate in the process of attaining membership. Although these implementations come with challenges, they aim to

benefit the nation domestically and with its diplomatic standing. First, the nation vetted its judicial branch, making key constitutional amendments, such as new electoral laws, and opening trials for corrupt judges, to echo the values of the EU on fighting deep-rooted corruption in the justice system. Next, the Albanian government digitized 95 percent of public and administrative services through its e-Albania portal to promote quality and transparency. Further, Albania exercised its economic resilience, rebounding from the COVID-19 pandemic and the shocks of the war in Ukraine. Since 2020, the country has significantly emphasized growing its industries – improving tourism and the real estate sector. Conclusively, Albania prioritized sustainable growth in its agricultural, environmental, and digital sectors, contributing to its rising economic growth of 3.3 percent in 2024.

The progress in 2024 represents an important step forward in Albania's European aspirations, with the country reportedly seeking membership by 2030. The European Commission's 2024 Enlargement Package, adopted in late October, further outlines the path forward for Albania's integration process. Despite the above-stated

encouraging trends in the accession process, the United States and the European Union have increasingly turned their attention to calling for resolving Albania's domestic crises, rather than solely on the progression of its EU membership status. This change in priorities demonstrates a growing international worry regarding the country's domestic stability, which risks undermining the achievements in accession talks.

### Civil Unrest

The latter half of 2024 has seen a significant escalation in political tensions, which erupted into widespread civil unrest throughout Albania. What began as a political party dispute evolved into violent riots, with protesters vandalizing and hurling petrol bombs at public administration and government buildings in July. The situation only intensified following the house arrest of opposition leader Sali Berisha on corruption charges, which he denounced as politically motivated, leading to public anger and demonstrations. By October, clashes between protesters and police in Tirana had become increasingly violent during a call for a technocratic caretaker cabinet ahead of the 2025 parliamentary elections. Anti-

riot police repeatedly used tear gas and water cannons to disperse crowds as protests continue to intensify. In late October, opposition protesters blocked roads in six towns across Albania, significantly disrupting daily life and commerce. By late November, opposition lawmakers were blocking streets in the capital, accusing the government of corruption. The escalating nature of these protests, with demonstrators throwing Molotov cocktails and engaging in confrontations with police forces, indicates a deepening political crisis that threatens Albania's stability and its EU aspirations. These socio-political inefficiencies are highlighted by the EU, where they urge Albania to step back and resolve their national crises internally.

### Political Corruption & Rule of Law

Albania is still beset by serious political corruption issues in the form of high-level arrests, street protests, and negative reports from international organizations. Former President, Ilir Meta, was arrested in October 2024 on allegations of passive corruption, failure to declare assets, and money laundering. However, his attorneys blamed the arrest as being partisan

and politically driven, especially the timing, in the run-up to national parliamentary elections scheduled to take place in 2025. In addition, the detention and conviction of Fredi Beleris, a Greek ethnic politician and mayor of Himarë, on charges of vote-buying has escalated diplomatic tensions between Greece, an EU member state, and Albania. Beleris argues that he was detained for political reasons, which could also jeopardize Albania's bid to join the European Union. In September 2024, former Prime Minister Berisha was indicted for corruption, contributing to the growing number of prominent political leaders battling legal troubles. In addition, an MP from the Socialist Party was indicted for violating public procurement rules in October. These instances—opposition MPs being threatened by police in parliament and the new police director being investigated for corruption and abuse of power, leading to the seizure of his access to external communication before he assumed office—paint a concerning picture of Albania's rule of law.

The rule of law index in the country has decreased, placing Albania 89 out of 142 countries worldwide. There are serious concerns regarding the lack of limitations on government powers

and individual rights. At the same time, the transparency index of Albania decreased to 37 out of 100, placing the country at 98 out of 180 countries, indicating that in the public sector, there are still problems related to deception and more efficient anti-corruption efforts are needed. The European Commission Albania Report 2024 reflects these persisting issues, noting little advancement against corruption, although accession negotiations have been opened. These ongoing corruption and rule of law issues and the rule of law significantly hinder Albanian integration within the EU and democratic progress.

### Statelessness & Human Rights Violations on the Roma Population

The Roma populations in Albania remain subject to structural discrimination and human rights violations, with statelessness becoming a significant concern in 2024. In February, the United Nations Human Rights Committee concluded that Albania violates the rights of Roma children by failing to register them at birth, a basic right that enables access to education, health, and social services. This report underscores the persistent administrative challenges Roma

families face in trying to register their children. These barriers are due to the absence of documentation, administrative costs, and discriminatory attitudes within state institutions, and lead to an intergenerational cycle of statelessness among Roma communities in Albania, with 5,000 to 7,000 Roma individuals having no proper documents or legal status.

The challenge is especially pronounced in informal settlements, where numerous Roma citizens reside with no fundamental infrastructure and where children are born outside of healthcare facilities, further entrenching the challenges associated with birth registration. Apart from the issue of statelessness, Roma communities are persistently exposed to pervasive discrimination in work, housing, and education. Minority Rights notes that nearly 40% of Roma children in Albania fail to attend school regularly. The personal testimonies of Roma activists, published by the Open Society Foundations, describe the everyday realities of being both a Roma and an Albanian citizen. They highlight the intersection of ethnic identity and citizenship rights in a society where institutionalized discrimination is firmly entrenched. As Albania aspires to join the

EU, addressing these human rights violations against the Roma population is both a moral imperative and a requirement to meet the Copenhagen accession criteria.

### Year in Review

In 2024, Albania experienced substantial opportunities alongside serious challenges in pursuing European integration. The formal opening of European Union membership negotiations in Luxembourg in October was a significant step towards Albania's bid for EU membership. Nevertheless, this diplomatic advance has been largely overshadowed by escalating domestic unrest, as opposition-led demonstrations turned violent, with protesters throwing petrol bombs at government buildings and clashing with police in multiple cities. The political situation continued to be destabilized by high-profile corruption cases, such as the arrest of former President Ilir Meta and the house arrest of opposition leader Sali Berisha, which contributed heavily to Albania's sinking positions in global rankings of rule of law and transparency. As parliamentary elections loom in 2025 and the global community favours domestic

stability over EU progress, Albania finds itself at a dangerous juncture where its success in managing internal crises will seal the destiny of its shift from 'East' to 'West.'

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## Introduction

Armenia has historically struggled due to its geopolitical location, caught between the West and Russia. This tension is still felt in present times, as Armenia is opening to the West, and talks of it joining the E.U. are ongoing, while it remains an important trade partner of Russia. Over the past year, Armenia's foreign, security, and economic policy has started to turn towards the West, opting for a diversification strategy centered on reducing its dependence on Russia. This shift is a result of regional security issues stemming from a long-standing war and Russia's failure to protect Armenia from its threats. Armenia's uncertainty about its neighbours has only increased, pushing it toward greater openness. Tensions are high over the resolution of the border war with Azerbaijan and the peace treaty.

## Armenia Pivoting to the West

The EU Mission in Armenia (EUMA) was launched in 2022 to observe and report on the situation along the border, strengthen Armenia's security, and support regional stability. Opinion polls have shown rising trust in the E.U.;

indeed, according to the 2024 annual survey, opinion in Armenia showed that 60% of Armenians trust the E.U. more than other institutions. Furthermore, 4 out of 5 respondents believe that relations between the E.U. and Armenia are good. The European Parliament's resolution to develop closer ties has prompted Armenia to make the necessary changes to become closer to Europe. Armenia has applied to become a candidate for accession to the European Union. This is due to Armenia's commitment to democratic reforms and its growing uncertainty regarding its relations with Russia due to a lack of Russian support over the regional war with Azerbaijan. The E.U. is also urged to support Armenia in securing the defense of Karabakh Armenians. Indeed, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen called for Brussels to move away from its equidistance policy to support Armenia. This is an important shift in European affairs to build closer relations with Armenia's democracy. Europe must shift its policies from mediating a peace deal with Azerbaijan to developing a closer relationship with Armenia, which seeks to build ties with the European Union after a Russian betrayal. A lack of European ambition could endanger Armenia's young democracy and

## Armenia's Vibrant Startup Ecosystem & Lively Tech Startup Scene

Armenia is cultivating its tech sector by partnering with BANA angels to plan an investor tour during the World Congress on Information Technology 2024 and other DigiTech events. The collaboration has attracted international investors to Armenia. With the boom of angel investors, Armenian startups gained new resources and expanded more into international markets. This was clearly highlighted at the World Congress on Innovation & Technology (WCIT) in 2024, where Mkhitar Hayrapetyan (Armenian Minister of High-Tech industry) vocalized Armenia's long-term focus on artificial intelligence and innovative technologies to achieve technological independence, aiming at improving Armenian societal and environmental outcomes. His interests in government digitalization focus on using AI to address critical challenges in healthcare, education, and the economy. Hayrapetyan launched two transformative programs to strengthen start-ups, enhance their market presence and drive economic progress. Armenia hosted the WCIT, highlighting Armenia's dedication to innovation

and global partnerships. Further, it was a key step in promoting and internationalizing Armenia's IT sector. The congress featured a talk by Elon Musk, who brought Starlink to Armenia to connect the country with the 'broader' world. Starlink is being tested and should be available for rollout in 2025. Hayrapetyan has focused on developing and implementing innovation-driven scientific research projects with the University of Armenia. He highlighted a seven-year program for the development of the tech sector and presented the reforms. The seven-year program, approved in October 2024, includes state support for the High-Tech sector, amendments to the tax code, and tax incentives specifically for R&D employees. This also allows for new collaborations, including programs and grants for higher education in tech.

#### Azerbaijan - Armenia Border Peace Deals: Armenia's Struggles and Discontent over Lands Reclaimed by Azerbaijan

Armenia is landlocked and dealing with border tensions with its neighboring countries. Armenia began 2024 by suggesting signing a non-aggression pact with Azerbaijan. However, this did not lead to any meaningful resolution,

as Armenian casualties occurred during a border flare-up in February. Armenia remains determined to find a peace deal amid ongoing border negotiations. Azerbaijan has declared itself a regional power. The seizing of Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023 caused major issues for the population living in these regions, with over 100,000 people fleeing to be re-integrated into Armenia. During border talks, Armenian protesters marched against territorial concession to Azerbaijan. After a violent backlash from Armenians, 150 were detained by Armenian police. Armenia agreed to give back four villages to Azerbaijan that it had taken in the 1990s. These villages held significant strategic importance for landlocked Armenia. Armenians were unhappy with these decisions, leading to widespread rallies. In 32 years, Armenia has never been closer to having its borders restored. However, news of this development is met with mixed feelings. Former Minister Vartan Oskanian has heavily criticized Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's approach to Azerbaijan, claiming that Pashinyan is complying with Azerbaijan despite Armenia's clear legal victories. Oskanian predicts this will lead to a relentless cycle of surrender which could result in further ceding of Armenian soil,

security, and sovereignty. Alen Simonyan, President of the National Assembly of Armenia, also faced strong criticism after accusing the Armenians of Artsakh of failing to resist Azerbaijan's aggression in the September 2023 attack. This attack led to the displacement of over 100,000 Armenians. Freedom House concluded that the Azerbaijani regime engaged in ethnic cleansing against the Armenian population of Artsakh. Pashinyan published an article dismissing claims in Azerbaijan that Armenia is preparing for war. He affirmed that the Republic of Armenia is committed to the strategic agreements reached in Prague on October 6, 2022, where Azerbaijan and Armenia recognized each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty. Pashinyan concluded, "the solutions are on the table," as he reiterated Armenia's proposal for mutual arms control and joint investigation in border control. However, Ayan Hajizadeh, foreign ministry spokesperson, accused Armenia of militarization. Indeed, their military expenditure rose from 600 million in 2021 to 1.6 billion in 2024. "There can be no peace if accountability for war crimes is absent," stated Aram Hamparian, Executive director of Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA).

#### Year in Review

The year 2024 in Armenia has seen the development of closer ties with the E.U., as well as fostering diversification in the Tech industry and a commitment by Armenia to develop its republic and become independent. However, the growing controversies and anti-state actions taken by Pashinyan to enhance and speed up the resolution of border conflicts with Azerbaijan have led to crimes against human rights, with over 100,000 displaced Armenians. Despite the investments and steps the EU is taking to develop a relationship with Armenia, potentially leading to EU membership, there is an imminent threat to that relationship: the conditions surrounding the resolution of the Azerbaijan – Armenia border conflict.

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Population  
9,158,750  
Unemployment Rate  
5.3%  
GDP Per Capita  
51,600 USD  
EU Status  
EU Member

Katherine Davies

# Austria



## Introduction

In 2024, Austria experienced devastating floods and a national election that brought the far-right Freedom Party to power. These events mirrored those in other European countries as the continent grapples with the climate change-induced increased frequency of extreme weather events; the unprecedented success of the far right in both Austrian national and European Parliamentary elections was consistent with the rise of the far right across the continent. Austria also made a significant foreign policy change by dropping its veto on Romania and Bulgaria's membership in the Schengen Area, enabling the two countries to integrate fully into the free movement zone.

## Floods in Central Europe

In mid-September 2024, extreme flooding devastated communities across Central Europe, and Lower Austria was among the hardest-hit regions. The torrential rains accompanying Storm Boris deposited more than five times the average monthly rainfall for September. The Red Cross estimated that approximately 2,000 people in Lower Austria

had to abandon their homes and seek emergency shelter. Five deaths occurred in Austria out of twenty-seven total. As the Austrian elections approached, political parties cancelled events across the country. *Der Standard*, a centre-left Austrian daily, reported on the state's fire chief describing the strain of responding to a new natural disaster every month from June onward. The fire brigade was deployed more than 100,000 times in 2024 (compared to around 70,000 in 2023), with approximately 25% of operations relating to the September floods. The Federal Army was also called upon to assist with the emergency response.

On September 22nd, the federal government and the state of Lower Austria announced an increased disaster fund compensation rate for flood victims from a minimum of 20% to 50% of damages and up to 80% in cases of extreme hardship. The increase was made possible by more than 500 million euros in funding promised to Austria by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen at a meeting held in Poland on September 19th with the leaders of Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Austria. However, cleaning and rebuilding will likely take years, particularly devastating for communities

that have experienced similar catastrophes twice in the last two decades after comparable floods in 2002 and 2013. Fourteen of the initial 370 road closures from the 2024 floods persisted months later, even after hundreds of repair and rehabilitation projects. Residents of affected communities described both the trauma of the event and the emotional and financial burden of attempting to rebuild when insurance often only covers a fraction of the damage. The increased frequency of extreme weather events throughout the country, combined with Europe's hottest summer on record, was a potent reminder of the rapidly accelerating effects of climate change.

## National Elections: Rise of the Far Right

On September 29th, 2024, elections took place for Austria's 183-member National Council, the lower house of the bicameral Austrian parliament. Voter turnout was high at 77.7% of the electorate (a 2.1% increase from 2019). Of the parties that cleared the 4% threshold to win seats, the far-right FPÖ won 28.8% of the vote (57 seats), followed by the conservative ÖVP with 26.3% (51 seats), the Social Democrats,

polls demonstrated that declared voters were most attracted by the party's positions. Voters who spoke to *Der Standard* post-election cited issues like migration policy, government overreach during the Covid-19 pandemic, and taxes.

### Austria Drops Schengen Veto Against Bulgaria and Romania

In December 2024, Austria's Interior Ministry announced it would drop its veto on Romania and Bulgaria fully joining the Schengen free-travel area. Subsequently, the EU Justice and Home Affairs Council in Brussels adopted the decision, announcing that internal land border checks with and between Bulgaria and Romania would end on January 1st, 2025. Romania and Bulgaria have been members of the EU since 2007. Both countries have met Schengen zone requirements since 2011. However, numerous countries had opposed their accession over the intervening period, most recently Austria, which began exercising its veto power in 2022 (alongside the Netherlands, which lifted its veto in 2023), citing concerns that illegal immigrants were reaching Austria from the Balkans.

In March 2024, an agreement between the three

countries concluded with lifts on air and maritime border checks in Romania and Bulgaria. Austria's decision to drop the veto was motivated by a November 2024 border protection agreement announced at an EU Council meeting in Budapest. The commitments include deploying one hundred border guards from Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania to the Bulgarian-Turkish border and maintaining six-month-long temporary controls at land crossings. Austrian Interior Minister Gerhard Karner emphasized that the number of migrants intercepted attempting to illegally cross Austria's border with Hungary in the Austrian state of Burgenland had fallen from 70,000 in 2023 to just 4,000 in 2024. Furthermore, in 2024, unauthorized entries declined by 47% in Bulgaria, 53% in Romania, and 67% in Austria compared to 2023. The ÖVP-led initiative drew praise from across the political spectrum. Opposition party members noted that the change would be good news for Austria and the former candidate countries and criticized the ÖVP's previously held position.

### EU Elections

The EU Parliamentary elections held between June 6th

and 9th, 2024, yielded results similar to the national elections in Austria. Of the twenty total seats available, Patriots for Europe (PfE) won six, the Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats) (EPP) won five, the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament (S&D) won five, Renew Europe won two, and the Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/ EFA) won two. By national party, FPÖ garnered the greatest support with 25.36% of the vote, ÖVP won 24.52%, SPÖ won 23.22%, Grüne won 11.08%, NEOS won 10.14%, the communist KPÖ won 2.96%, and other parties won 2.72%. Voter turnout was 56.25% of the electorate, compared to 50.66% in 2019. Of Austria's then 18 total seats, by political group, EPP won seven, S&D won five, Identity and Democracy (ID) won three, the Greens/ EFA won two, and Renew Europe won one. Also in that election, by the national party, ÖVP won 34.55% of the vote, SPÖ won 23.89%, FPÖ won 17.20%, Grüne won 14.08%, NEOS won 8.44%, the green and left-wing populist JETZT won 1.04%, and other parties won 0.80%. After the 2024 elections, observers correctly predicted that the success of the FPÖ in the European Parliament elections held in June 2024 was a

strong indicator of the upcoming national election results. The six MEPs associated with FPÖ sit with the Patriots for Europe (PfE) group in the European Parliament.

### Year in Review

Overall, 2024 saw many interconnected issues arise in Austrian society and politics. Disastrous flooding drastically impacted the lives of thousands of people in the direct lead-up to the national elections. Climate change, migration, and more were on the ballot in elections that resulted in the historic rise of the far-right Freedom Party. In contrast to the FPÖ's Eurosceptic stance, the defeated ÖVP furthered European integration by dropping its veto, which had been the only remaining obstacle to Bulgaria and Romania joining the Schengen Area. While these issues cannot capture the complexity of the year's events, climate change-induced crises and the rise of far-right parties represent notable trends. The FPÖ's performance mirrors a broader rise of right-wing populism and nationalism throughout Europe, as seen in the electoral victories of the Netherlands' Geert Wilders and the Freedom Party, Italy's Giorgia Meloni and the Brothers of Italy party, Germany's AfD, and Marine

le Pen and the National Rally party in France. Developments in these areas have been consequential within Austria and Europe for several years. As more far-right parties come to power, policy responses to challenges like climate, migration, and security will likely change significantly.

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## AZERBAIJAN

Anna Lysenko

### Introduction

Azerbaijan's 2024 was defined by superficial elections, human rights abuses, and politically tense yet economically profitable relations with the European Union (EU). The year began with the Council of Europe not ratifying Azerbaijan's delegation credentials, signalling disapproval of the decades-long dictatorship. European relations remained unfriendly over the year, as the EU condemned Azerbaijan for unfair presidential and parliamentary elections and constant human rights abuses by the ruling President Ilham Aliyev and his party. However, despite the EU's public criticism of Azerbaijan's illiberal political system, at the end of the year Interfax reported that the EU imported 2.4% more natural gas from Azerbaijan in 2024 than in 2023, signifying Azerbaijan's continued importance to Europe despite its anti-democratic practices.

### European Integration

In 2024, Azerbaijan and the EU had clashing values, blocking opportunities for meaningful collaboration. The year began with confrontation, as on January 1, the Parliamentary Assembly of

the Council of Europe resolved not to ratify the credentials of the Azerbaijani delegation, stating that the country has "not fulfilled major commitments" stemming from its joining the Council of Europe 20 years ago. This decision came after extensive debates regarding Azerbaijan's compliance with democratic principles, human rights, and the rule of law. The Assembly cited concerns about restrictions on freedom of expression, political repression, and the detention of opposition figures, journalists, and human rights activists.

The EU maintained its condemnation of Azerbaijan's human rights abuses throughout the year. Most notably, on October 24, the European Parliament condemned Azerbaijan's domestic human rights violations, highlighting cases of harassment and persecution against independent media outlets and civil society organizations. The resolution underscored the importance of safeguarding freedom of the press and ensuring fair trials, urging Azerbaijani authorities to release all individuals detained for expressing dissenting opinions. Furthermore, the European Parliament called for greater transparency in Azerbaijan's legal system and emphasized the need for impartial investigations.

into allegations of torture and abuses in detention facilities.

The EU offered Azerbaijan opportunities for continued political partnership despite its simultaneous condemnation of clashing values. From Monday, November 11, to Friday, November 22, Azerbaijan hosted the 29th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP29) in Baku. A delegation from the EU was in attendance. The conference provided a setting for bilateral dialogue on climate action and sustainable development. Representatives from the EU and Azerbaijan engaged in discussions aimed at fostering cooperation in reducing greenhouse gas emissions, promoting renewable energy, and adapting to climate change.

Notably, Azerbaijan's continued ties to the Russian Federation further strained its EU relations. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the EU imposed punitive economic and political measures on Russia. That has not been the case for Azerbaijan. President Aliyev and Russian President Vladimir Putin met multiple times throughout the year. Following one such meeting on August 19, President Aliyev's office released statements praising the country's close sociopolitical and

economic ties. Yet 2024 ended in unexpectedly splintered relations with Russia. On December 25, an Azerbaijan Airlines passenger plane flying from Baku to Grozny in Russia's Chechnya region was diverted and crashed in Kazakhstan, killing 38 of the 67 people on board. An Azerbaijani lawmaker later stated there was a "very strong" possibility that the crash was caused by Russian air defence systems on alert for Ukrainian drone attacks. Russian President Vladimir Putin apologised for the crash but did not accept responsibility for it, instead proposing theories of birds or plane faults. In remarks on December 29, President Aliyev stated these theories were "absurd" and indicated that the "friendly country" wanted to cover up the incident.

2024 ended with Azerbaijan's political relations with the EU being in a similar state as during the year's start. On December 19, the European Parliament condemned human rights breaches in Azerbaijan, Crimea, and Kyrgyzstan, focusing on Azerbaijan's continued media repressions. The resolution denounced the closure of independent media outlets, censorship of online content, and intimidation of journalists critical of the government. European

lawmakers stressed that freedom of the press is essential for a functioning democracy and urged Azerbaijan to create an environment where journalists can report without fear of retaliation. Additionally, the resolution called on the EU to monitor human rights developments in Azerbaijan closely and to consider imposing targeted sanctions on individuals responsible for severe violations if the situation does not improve.

Presidential and Parliamentary

## Elections

Azerbaijan's 2024 presidential and parliamentary elections were widely condemned by international observers, who argued they were unfairly conducted in a repressed political environment controlled by incumbent President Aliyev and his party. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan's domestic media praised President Aliyev and the unity and prosperity he promised to keep delivering the regime.

Originally scheduled for October 2025, Azerbaijan's presidential election was brought forward after the December 2023 Nagorno-Karabakh offensive, which marked a significant shift in the region's geopolitical landscape. The election was thus held on

February 7. Incumbent President Aliyev secured a fifth consecutive term, winning 92.12% of the vote. The overwhelming margin of victory solidified President Aliyev's continued grip on power. International observers expressed continued concerns about the election's fairness and transparency.

Following the presidential election, Azerbaijan also held early parliamentary elections on September 1. These elections were called after the parliament was dissolved in June 2024, advancing the vote from its originally scheduled date in November. The ruling New Azerbaijan Party, led by President Aliyev, secured a majority, winning 68 out of 125 seats in the National Assembly. This outcome further consolidated the party's dominance in Azerbaijani politics, leaving even less legitimate opportunities for opposition voices in Azerbaijan's political institutions.

The elections were met with criticism from international bodies and human rights organizations. On September 3, Peter Stano, the Lead Spokesperson for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of the EU, condemned the parliamentary elections, stating that they were conducted "against the background of continued repression of dissenting voices." The EU's statement highlighted

concerns regarding media censorship, restrictions on freedom of assembly, and the imprisonment of political activists and journalists.

Local opposition parties echoed these concerns, alleging widespread voter intimidation, ballot stuffing, and a lack of impartial oversight. Despite these allegations, the Azerbaijani government defended the legitimacy of both elections, emphasizing the high voter turnout and the stability that the results would bring to the nation. Altogether, the electoral outcome deepened existing tensions between Azerbaijan and Western democracies, including those in the EU.

## Economy and EU Economic Relations

In 2024, Azerbaijan's economy grew, as did its strategic economic relations with the EU. End-of-year reports elucidated Azerbaijan's continued economic development and controversies. In particular, on November 1, the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project published an investigation revealing various COP29 partnerships were awarded to President Aliyev's relatives. Azerbaijan's government officials publicly defended the partnerships,

emphasizing their role in ensuring the success of the climate summit.

Shortly after this controversy, on November 13, President Aliyev met with Odile Renaud-Basso, President of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), to discuss Azerbaijan and the EU's growing economic partnership. Both leaders underscored the importance of strengthening bilateral ties, particularly in the energy and infrastructure sectors. The meeting also highlighted Azerbaijan's significance in Europe's energy diversification initiative following the Russo-Ukrainian War's negative impact on the EU's Russian gas imports. Azerbaijan's rich natural gas reserves and geographic proximity to the EU make it an important economic ally. The Southern Gas Corridor, which transports Azerbaijani gas to Europe, continues to be a critical component of the EU's energy strategy. Indeed, on November 7, Interfax reported that the EU imported 2.4% more natural gas from Azerbaijan in 2024 than in 2023. Azerbaijan's domestic media hailed this increase in exports as beneficial for the state's future growth, with expanding gas production and export capacities.

Ending the year, on November 26, the EBRD released

Azerbaijan's 2024-25 Transition Report, estimating GDP growth in 2024 at around 3.8%. This positive economic performance was attributed to strong international demand for natural gas, increased public investment in infrastructure, and rising real incomes that boosted consumer spending. The report also noted improvements in Azerbaijan's business environment, with ongoing reforms aimed at attracting foreign investment and fostering private sector growth.

Additionally, the report, as well as Azerbaijan's domestic media, highlighted the government's efforts to diversify the economy beyond gas. Key initiatives included developing renewable energy projects, modernizing transportation networks, and supporting small and medium-sized enterprises. However, political challenges prevented Azerbaijan's economic growth from attracting international praise as nationwide corruption and a lack of governmental transparency remained key concerns.

## Year in Review

Azerbaijan's 2024 consisted of strained political relations with the EU due to continuous human rights abuses and rigged presidential and parliamentary

elections. Simultaneously, Azerbaijan strengthened its economic partnership with the EU by exporting considerable quantities of gas. Azerbaijan's repressive, anti-democratic regime elicited well-deserved condemnation from international observers and the few existing opposition parties. While heavily controlled domestic media praised President Aliyev's assertive political and economic actions, international media highlighted the cost at which these national achievements came - that of human rights and civil liberties. The EU was one such actor criticizing the regime's oppression and encouraging pro-democratic change. However, the EU's economic decisions did little to meaningfully motivate Azerbaijan to change its current political practices. The EU's increased exports of Azerbaijan's natural resources and discussions aimed at promoting further joint initiatives indicated the EU was not serious about its statements to stand by democratic values at the expense of economics. In 2024, Azerbaijan failed to democratize because of limited external pressure and heavily restricted internal democratic mechanisms. The national ethos remained the same as it has been for decades now: dictatorship is as dictatorship goes.

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## Introduction

For Belgium, 2024 was a year best characterised by the concept of change. The year reflected a shift away from the status quo and was marked by significant political, economic, and social turmoil and change. On the political front, 2024 was a year of paramount importance due to the concurrent occurrence of both the European and federal elections. In said elections, the nation witnessed significant voter shifts, particularly towards right-wing movements, reflecting broader trends across Europe; yet nuanced by the singularity of Belgium's linguistic and cultural divisions. With regards to Belgium's economy in 2024, a topic of great contention and significance was that of the energy sector demonstrating an unwavering commitment to sustainability and independence from Russian gas, even as it grapples with challenges posed by becoming a net energy importer for the first time in recent years. On the social front, Belgium's role in 2024 was characterised by its persisting struggles with security and drug trafficking, although some optimism is warranted by the establishment of frontier anti-production, trafficking and abuse of illicit drugs initiatives. All of these

profound reforms across political, economic and social constituents illustrate Belgium's pressing domestic challenges but also underscore its interconnectedness with European and international trends more widely. The following report will analyse these three aforementioned focal areas, evaluating their implications for Belgium, particularly in a domestic and European context.

### Federal and European Elections: A Polarising Political Turning Point

The 2024 Federal and European elections in Belgium led to seismic shifts in the political landscape. With the consistently highest voter turnout in the EU, the Belgian poll results this year represented deep and widespread civic duty and engagement, as well as profound political divides, particularly along linguistic lines that determine the regions of the nation. Indeed, while the Flanders (Flemish speaking) region followed major EU trends and gravitated towards far-right parties, a stark contrast was marked with Wallonia (French speaking) which remained majoritarily favourable to centre-left parties traditionally considered political hegemons in Belgium.

## European Elections

Due to the reconsidered EU population split, Belgium acquired a 22nd seat in the parliament, thus arguably making the 2024 European parliamentary elections one of if not the most important in recent history with regards to Belgium's impact on the broader European community. Due to the aforementioned language lines, Belgium is constituted of 3 distinct electoral colleges; one representing each region in which the 3 national languages are spoken. Thus, for this election, the 22 Belgian seats in European parliament were allocated in the following distribution: 13 members of European Parliament (MEPs) elected by the Dutch-speaking electoral college, 8 elected by the French-speaking, and 1 elected by the German-speaking electoral college.

In the Flanders region, right to far-right parties obtained unprecedented numbers of votes, split mostly across the Vlaams Belang party, N-VA (New Flemish Alliance) and CD&V party which obtained 22.7%, 23.9% and 13% of the votes respectively. On the other hand, Wallonia saw little change from the previous European elections, and remained firmly supportive of centrist political

parties, although the Reformist Movement (centre-right) saw an increase of 15.6% in the total vote share (from 19.3% in 2019 to 34.9% in the 2024 elections); thus resulting in an additional MEP representation. Although the shift indicates a unity of sorts with regards to a national movement towards right-wing political ideologies, the extent of said shift is drastically different between Wallonia and Flanders.

As for the East Cantons (German speaking region), which elected 1 MEP, the Christian Socialist Party (CSP) retained their overwhelming support, obtaining over double the votes of their closest competitors ProDG (also center-right).

## Federal Elections

With regards to the 2024 federal elections, the Wallonia-Flanders political divide was also apparent, with votes closely mirroring those of the European election results. One aspect of notable importance is the poor performance of Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats in both elections, which led to the swift resignation of Prime Minister Alexander De Croo following his party's underwhelming performance. In the interim prior

to the appointment of a new prime minister, the N-VA's strong election performance on the other hand prompted Flemish nationalist Bart De Wever to be appointed by the king to form a new government.

This task, which has yet to be accomplished, is sure to pave the way for a more right-wing government and could likely create much discord within Belgium due to De Wever's Flemish nationalist views and historical track record for attempting to "rip his region away from the rest of Belgium." In the immediate short term however, De Wever's has proposed the "Arizona coalition" (N-VA, MR, LE, Vooruit, CD&V) to form a new coalition government. Although the "Arizona" plan is to be pitched to the king in the near future, "defense, security, justice, migration, community" are all confirmed priorities of De Wever's proposed agenda.

This political upheaval underscores a growing dissonance between Flemish and Wallonian priorities, as exemplified by both of the election results. Flanders' increasing alignment with far-right ideology and political parties reflects concerns over migration, security, and a desire for greater regional autonomy. Conversely, Wallonia's more tentative shift towards right-wing politics

highlights its persisting preference for more progressive policies. This discord in political ideology and priorities are expected to become points of contention that could complicate Belgian coalition negotiations, likely leading to prolonged political instability in 2025.

When examined in a European context however, the general shift towards right-wing politics complies with European trends, with populist and nationalist parties gaining traction as immigration and security become pressing topics of priority for Belgium and the EU. However, unique to Belgium is the linguistic and regional friction which complicates the state's political sphere. In 2025 and beyond, tensions between Flemish and Wallonian political parties will likely persist and centre on migration policies and economic reforms, which could lead to much political instability as Belgium's political sphere continues to struggle with internal turmoil.

### Energy: Sustainability Priorities and Anti-Russian Stance Leads to Net Energy Import

As for political and electoral elements, 2024 proved to

be a year of significant change in the energy sector, with the country transitioning from a net exporter position which they had held for nearly a decade to a net importer of electricity. Generally, such a conversion is considered a step back in terms of autonomy and energetic progress for a nation. However, in Belgium, this transition has largely been received by the public and experts as a positive outcome. Indeed, there are two main reasons which have led Belgium to become a net electricity importer (although only importing 0.5% electricity more than exports). The first, is the increased prioritisation of sustainable energy in Belgium, whose transition required increased imports to compensate for the developing flexible grid management (for periods of intermittent low output due to weather conditions). The second main reason is the intransigent ban on Russian liquefied natural gas for geopolitical reasons which has led to increased import dependence in the short term from neighbouring electricity exporters.

In recent years, Belgium has cemented itself as one of the most ambitious European nations when it comes to sustainable energy. From their pledge to phase out nuclear energy by 2025 to several significant government

trade, notably from France and the Netherlands. This increased dependency however, is seen by Belgium as a temporary necessity to accomplish their long term goals of increased sustainability and thus, is perceived as a positive indicator in 2024 by the public and experts alike.

The other reason for which Belgium's net electricity import position in 2024 is seen as a positive situation, is their intransigent ban and stance on Russian LNG. Verily, Belgium was one of the European countries spearheading discussions and the move to ban Russian LNG exports into the EU. Reasons for this are geopolitical in nature, with the ban coming into effect as a sanction of sorts on Russia in response to the war in Ukraine. Furthermore, the move aligns with EU goals of energy sovereignty from non-EU states. However, once again, this ban fuelled the need for Belgium to look elsewhere to satisfy their immediate energy needs, thus resulting in a concentration of Belgian energy imports as electricity from neighbouring France and the Netherlands.

Ultimately however, this trend towards energy import is one that is likely to continue in Belgium in the foreseeable future as the transition towards sustainable energy continues to progress.

Most battery stations are expected to become operational in 2026, which could indicate a turning point for energetical sovereignty in Belgium, but until then, it is likely that energy imports will continue to be significant and probably larger than energy exports.

### Security: Cocaine and Anti-Drug Initiatives

In 2024, Belgium's role as the EU's drug (and particularly cocaine) capital came under the spotlight, with Antwerp harbour (2nd largest in Europe) being targeted by Europol for its rampant harbouring of illegal activities. Security and illicit drug issues in Antwerp and Belgium more holistically are far from being a new problem, with many calling the port a "narco-state," due to the lack of control by Belgian authorities within the port and the astronomically large volume of trafficked drugs that flow through it. However, as with politics and energy, 2024 was characterised by change. Indeed, federal and international security authorities including Belgian police, Europol, Interpol and others performed unprecedented drug busts such as the one that made global headlines in October for being one of the largest European drug busts in history. In this single

intervention co-lead by Frontex and Belgian customs, 525 ships were analysed in the port, leading to 930 kg of cocaine and 4,950 kg of hashish being seized. Operations such as this mark a turning point for the drug trade in Belgium, indicating a new era in which the nation hopes to restore control and minimise illicit-drug entry into the EU through Belgium. Coextending these aims, Belgium has tried and sentenced a record number of criminals on drug trading charges in 2024, thus solidifying the nation's newfound commitment to its war on drugs, and hopeful downwards trend in the Belgian drug trade in the coming years.

### Year in Review

2024 for Belgium is best characterised by the word 'change'. marked by political upheaval, energy transformation, and intensified security efforts, this year was a turning point for Belgium across the board. The European and Federal elections highlighted the nation's persisting regional divides along language lines, as well as the shifting dynamics towards right wing politics. In the energy sector, 2024 was a veritable turning point accentuated by the effects of a transition towards sustainable energies.

Furthermore, the energy sector also underscored a change in the provenance of electricity, marking a crossroads in which Belgium advocated for EU energetical sovereignty, despite the challenges of itself becoming a net importer. Meanwhile, significant changes in the approach and commitment to the Belgian war on drugs signifies a newfound resolve to address historically persistent security and drug related issues. Looking to 2025 and beyond, Belgium will surely continue to capitalise on this newfound momentum from 2024 to continue to strive for improvement in all sectors across the board.

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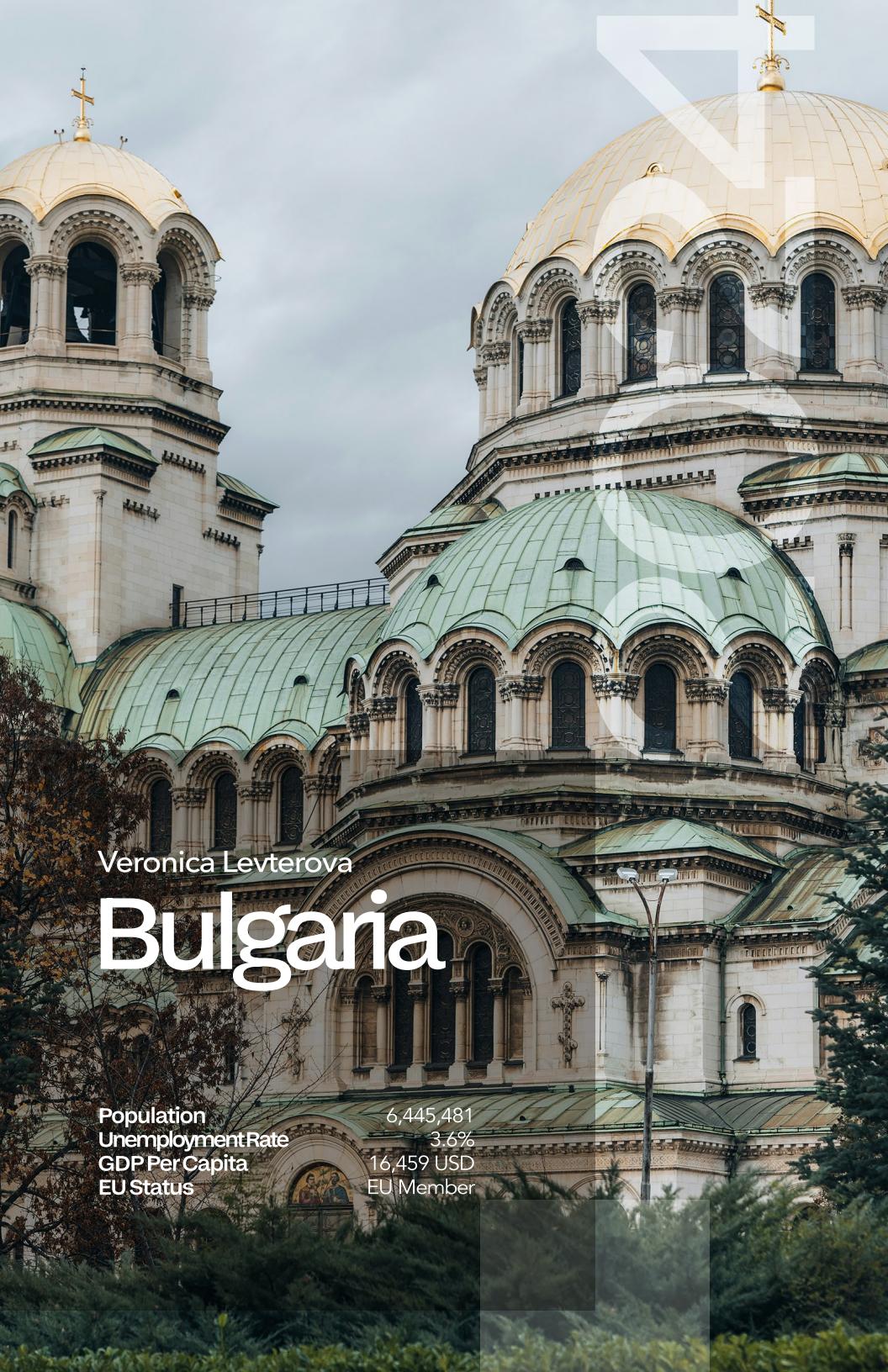
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## Introduction

2024 marked a critical year for Bulgaria's development on the world stage and in national affairs. Bulgaria was fully integrated into Schengen after a year of preparation and a period of partial integration. Additionally, due to continuing tension between political parties, the Bulgarian government was forced to enter its eighth election in three years. Finally, miners protested a new mining tax due to the dangers it would impose on job security and the sector's competitiveness. The year presented the Bulgarian government with new challenges and victories, developing their position on the world stage but also teaching them lessons that must be applied in future years.

## Integration into Schengen

January 1, 2025, marked Bulgaria's full integration into Schengen after discussions began in 2011. Bulgaria was unable to join in 2011 because Austria and the Netherlands vetoed its integration for fear of inadequate protection on the Bulgarian-Turkish border. On March 31, 2024, Bulgaria was granted partial Schengen membership through sea and air travel, but because of

enhanced security, it was granted full Schengen membership on January 1st. In the first six months of its new membership, Romanian, Austrian and Hungarian border patrol officers will be stationed at the Turkish border to ensure secure border crossings and random checks will be administered at internal borders. The Bulgarian government has predicted that this new accomplishment will increase Bulgaria's GDP by 1% through an increase in tourism to popular coasts around the Black Sea, historical sites, and mountain ranges. Additionally, joining Schengen will eliminate long wait times at the border, allowing for expedited and higher volumes of trade, ultimately boosting Bulgaria's economic relations with other EU countries. Though it is too soon to predict the specific benefits, the shared positive views of Schengen are expected to translate to Bulgaria's economy.

## Bulgarian National Elections

The Bulgarian political system has experienced instability since 2020 when thousands of Bulgarians gathered in Sofia to protest for 100 days against GERB, the conservative ruling party led by Boyko Borissov. These protests

were against due to internal corruption, constitutional breaches, and a slow decay of the rule of law. Since GERB's collapse in 2021, eight elections have been held in three years, the seventh and eighth happening on June 9, 2024, and October 27, 2024. In June, only 34.4% of Bulgarians participated in the election, and GERB was re-elected as a minority government, acquiring 68/240 seats, and "We Continue the Change" (PP), a social-democratic party, won 39/240 seats. The two parties were expected to form a coalition government; however, personal rivalries between the party leaders prohibited them from reaching an agreement. In September 2024, Bulgarian President Rumen Radev called for an eighth election, but most citizens did not expect a different outcome. GERB won 26% of the votes, both the PP and "Movements for Rights & Freedom" (DPS) won 16% of the votes, and Revival, a pro-Russian party, won 15% of the votes. Borissov was again mandated to form a coalition government, but tense relationships and claims that 9% of the GERB ballots were bought prevented its formation. Many political leaders have since expressed concern about the instability in the Bulgarian government following the elections. Interim Prime Minister Glavchev expressed his fears, stating, "I hope we will have a proper cabinet, but so far, we're witnessing a complete blockage of all parliamentary processes." Ultimately, political engagement and trust in the government has suffered immensely in Bulgaria, leaving many uncertain in the stability of Bulgaria's democracy.

## Mining Tax

On December 9, 2024, the Ministry of Finance (MOF) in Bulgaria announced that they would be imposing new taxes on the mining sector, which is responsible for 5% of Bulgaria's GDP, in an attempt to fulfill the 2025 budget. Mining companies were to pay 15% on ores and 8% on non-metallic minerals and fuels, equalling roughly 900 million BGN per year. The new tax was immediately met with letters, protests and discontentment. Nikolay Pelteko, the CEO of Asarel-Medet, a major copper mining company, stated that this new tax would terminate all investments made toward modernization and would cause more harm than good. Additionally, from the 19,000 employees, thousands gathered in front of the parliament on December 11 to protest the new tax. They claimed

that the tax would hurt Bulgaria's mining sector's competitiveness with other European countries, and would cause the mining sector to shut down, leaving thousands jobless. In light of the protests, Finance Minister Lyudmila Petkova announced that a one-time fee would be imposed on mines instead of a recurring tax. She hopes that with the integration into Schengen, the gaps in the 2025 budget will be filled through the expected increase in trade and tourism. This was an example of the Bulgarian government heeding influential voices, such as the mining sector. The government often considers mass protests, influential voices, and EU pressure, but is less likely to respond to citizen dissatisfaction if it is not largely publicized. Nonetheless, Bulgarian citizens continue to fight to have their voices heard by the government.

## EU Elections

On June 9, 2024, Bulgaria held its EU elections. Approximately 33.4% of Bulgarian citizens voted, one percent more than in 2019. Currently, 17 MEPs represent Bulgaria in the EU. In the EEP, GERB has five seats, and the PP party holds one. Renew Europe has three MEPs from the DPS party and two from the PP

and Democratic Bulgaria coalition. The Revival party holds three seats, the Bulgarian Socialists Party hold two S&D positions, and the "There is Such a People" party has one undecided position. These seat allocations were a large change from 2019, when five Bulgarian MEPs were in S&D, three in Renew Europe, seven in EPP, and two in ECR.

## Year in Review

2024 was a pivotal year for Bulgaria's internal and international political positioning. After years of negotiations, Bulgaria has asserted itself on the international stage by joining Schengen. Though in the face of political instability, Bulgarian citizens are disheartened by the continuing elections, they have proven, through the mining tax protests, that they will not be silenced. As Bulgaria adjusts itself to 2025, citizens can strengthen their government and institutions and encourage each other in hopes of creating a stronger country.

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## Introduction

In 2024, Cyprus faced a migrant crisis in the first quarter of the year, it held municipal and EU elections, and it also mourned the 50th anniversary of the partition of the island.

## Migration Issues

On April 3, 2024, President Nicholas Christodoulides declared a crisis as a result of the high influx of migrants arriving in the country. In the first three months of the year, more than 2,000 people arrived on the island by sea, whereas in the same time period in 2023, only 78 migrants reached Cyprus. This was almost a 2,500% increase in the span of a year. In late April of the same year, President Christodoulides stated that 7% of the Cypriot population was made up of immigrants. Cypriot news media and reporting imply that Cyprus was not physically capable of handling the great number of asylum seekers arriving in the country.

Cyprus faced an influx of migrants from Lebanon, namely due to rising tensions on the Israel-Lebanon border, according to reports from the Cypriot Ministry of the Interior. Cyprus is also the closest country to Lebanon for

entry to the European Union (EU). Both Cypriot and foreign media reported that the migrants arriving from Lebanon were Syrian refugees who had set up camp in the country. Cyprus called on the EU to provide aid to Lebanon contingent on its agreement to halt migration. President Christodoulides claimed that Cyprus was at its limits in regard to accepting further Syrian refugees, which is why he was also calling upon the EU for assistance to his country in managing the influx of migrants. On April 7, 2024, the Cypriot President met with the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, who agreed to assist Cyprus in affronting the migrant crisis, as well as striking a deal with the Lebanese government to curtail further migratory movements from the country to the island. Cyprus also signed an agreement with Lebanon to return refugees to the latter country. Cyprus' influx of migrants only decreased following this short crisis.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) noted that human rights abuses occur at Cypriot ports and at the hands of the Cypriot coast guard. Human rights abuses against migrants have been noted before 2024, with reports dating back to 2020. It appears as though these human rights issues have persisted,

if not increased, in the past four years. HRW called for Cyprus to abide by its commitments to human rights and for the EU to halt its funding to Lebanon and the island until they respected the asylum seekers' fundamental rights. On October 8, 2024, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) issued a judgment on a case brought against Cyprus by two Syrian refugees. The court found that Cyprus had acted unlawfully, treating them as economic migrants, returning them to Lebanon, and in turn, not properly processing their asylum applications. The island was ordered to pay around 50,000 euros in damages to the two plaintiffs.

## 50th Anniversary of the Partition of Cyprus

July 20, 2024, marked the 50th anniversary of the partition of Cyprus, which occurred in 1974. The Cypriot media marks the 50th anniversary of the "invasion" of Cyprus and the island's "division." The term "partition" is more formally used by foreign media and the United Nations. Cypriot media still uses the term pseudo-state to refer to the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). It is, however, more formally known as a de facto state, meaning a state

not officially recognized by other countries and most importantly, the United Nations (UN). The TRNC still is not formally recognized by any other country other than Türkiye and Azerbaijan. Yet, slight progress has been made in terms of its engagement with other nations. Hungarian President Viktor Orbán was present at the 2024 summit of the Organization of Turkic States, at which the TRNC was present. Cyprus expressed its dissatisfaction with Hungary's attendance at the summit.

Greece and Cyprus made fervent efforts to restart negotiations between Cyprus and the TRNC; however, this was met with great opposition from the Turkish side. This is because the TRNC repeatedly demanded equal state status and recognition from Cyprus for diplomatic talks to resume. Hence, no formal negotiations occurred in 2024. The only progress toward any solution was in the form of an unofficial dinner hosted by United Nations Secretary-General (UNSG) Antonio Guterres between Cypriot President Christodoulides and TRNC President Ersin Tatar on October 16, 2024. He urged them to bridge the gap between their positions on reunification in hopes that further discussions would take place in Cyprus between the two

leaders in an official capacity. No further discussions between the two leaders took place in 2024. Relationships were further soured by President Christodoulides' declaration of Cyprus' intent to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

In terms of foreign actors' stances on the question of Cyprus, the EU maintained its stance that all of the island's territory is an EU member state. United States (US) President Joe Biden acknowledged the 50th anniversary of the partition of Cyprus and reaffirmed the US' support for the island. Once again, President Biden rejected the Turkish claims of statehood over the northeastern part of the island as well as relevant demands to commence negotiations. President Biden and President Christodoulides stated their commitment to the UN framework toward solving the question of Cyprus, which is the basis for further diplomatic efforts. Prime Minister (PM) Konstantinos Mitsotakis of Greece was the first Greek PM to visit the island on the day of mourning for the 50th anniversary. Days prior to the anniversary day, he engaged in talks with the UNSG to solely discuss the question of Cyprus.

Foreign and Cypriot media outlets noted that the question of

Cyprus remains open. The longer it takes for formal and committed negotiations to occur among the responsible stakeholders in Ankara, Athens, Nicosia, and London—these countries are party to the source of the partition—the more difficult it will be to reconcile public and governmental opinion.

## Local and EU Elections

From June 6-9, 2024, the EU held elections for the European Parliament, and on June 9, Cyprus held municipal elections, which had been postponed from 2021. Local elections entailed voting for 29 mayors, 9 of which are for occupied and 2 for semi-occupied municipalities in the North. Cypriots also voted for a total of 443 mayoral consultants, 94 of which are for occupied areas. Voter turnout was measured at 50.5%.

EU elections entailed the Cypriot population voting for their Members of the European Parliament (MEP). Voter turnout increased from 44.99% in 2019 to 58.86% in 2024. 5.5% of the population voting in the elections comprised of Turkish Cypriots, as the EU allows them to participate in these elections. The conservative Democratic Rally (DISY) party, part of, the Group of the European People's Party (Christian

Democrats, EPP) came in first and received two seats. The left-wing Progressive Party of the Working People (AKEL) Party, part of the Left group in the European Parliament (The Left), came in second and received one seat. AKEL lost one seat from its previous term. Fidias Panayiotou, an independent, came in third and received one seat. The far-right-wing United Democratic Union of the Centre (ELAM), part of the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR) came in fourth and gained and received one seat. The Democratic Party (DIKO), a social democrat party part of the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament (S&D) came in last and received one seat.

There were no significant issues in the local elections apart from the fact that they were held concurrently with EU elections to save the state millions of euros in funds. The EU elections, however, were heightened by tensions among the parties. The two dominant parties, DISY and AKEL, were weakened by Fidias' social media campaign and ELAM's tactical gain from DISY's internal strife, its anti-immigration stance, and its clear prioritization of Greek Cypriots. ELAM's fourth-place finish was the first time a right-wing party from Cyprus won a seat in the

European parliament. At the same time, it also supports left-wing economic and welfare policies, underscoring its overarching populist character. ELAM highlights how the political system needs to change in response to Cypriots' needs. Fidias' win is historical, as it was the first time a completely independent candidate was elected to represent Cypriots in the EU, with no political experience or party ties. His trajectory in the polls emphasizes a similar trend to ELAM's, calling for politicians to be accountable and responsive to their voters. Even though DISY came first in the election polls, its outcome was historically the lowest it has ever been. The rise of ELAM in the resulting EU election polls aligns with the general rising trend of populism in Europe. Even though voter turnout for EU elections increased, it is still low, highlighting political apathy in Cyprus and Euroscepticism maintaining its grasp on the Cypriot population.

## Year in Review

All in all, Cyprus faced various issues, some of which subsided throughout the year, while others remain problems for the future. While the Cypriot government was able to afront its migrant crisis effectively, its human

rights violations and the ECHR verdict highlight the institutional issues in Cyprus' approach to migrants. Cyprus continued to express its support of reunification with the northeastern part of the island and has furthered its relations with the UN on the matter. Yet, it did not engage in any official negotiations or diplomatic efforts with the TRNC, stalling progress on reuniting the island's entire population. Cyprus was able to resume its democratic processes by holding municipal elections as well as furthering its commitment to the EU by participating in another round of elections for the European parliament. Voter turnout was low for both, affirming issues of public political disillusionment, Euroscepticism, and the rise of right-wing populism across Europe.

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## Introduction

Over the course of 2024, the Czech Republic navigated complex policy debates, economic pressures, and diplomatic breakthroughs—each reflecting its evolving position within Europe. From renewed discussions on euro adoption and contentious negotiations over stricter EU carmaker CO<sub>2</sub> fines to the signing of a landmark treaty with the Vatican, the country sought to strike a balance between deeper engagement with Brussels and growing domestic caution. Nowhere was this balancing act more evident than in the European Parliament elections where a resurgent populist opposition, shifting alliances within the Visegrád Group, and heightened scepticism toward Russia revealed broader tensions shaping Czech politics.

## Renewed Debate Over Euro Adoption

The prospect of adopting the euro took centre stage early in 2024, spurred by President Petr Pavel's New Year's address on January 1. In his remarks, the president urged the government to initiate concrete steps toward the eurozone – a significant statement

in a country where euro adoption has long been a topic of careful debate.

This momentum continued on February 5, when the government appointed economist Petr Zahradník as commissioner for Euro adoption, signalling a more structured approach to the process. Two days later, on February 7, the government formally evaluated the implications of joining the Exchange Rate Mechanism II (ERM II) – a mandatory two-year precursor to euro adoption. Officials emphasized the need for a “cautious” and data-driven approach to ensure that any transition aligns with the Czech Republic's economic realities.

Despite the early enthusiasm, by November 24, Prime Minister Petr Fiala's cabinet announced a postponement of any immediate decisions on adopting the euro until after the next parliamentary elections, citing that the newly formed government should make the decision following the elections. This effectively placed the debate on hold, reflecting concerns about public opinion, economic readiness, and broader political calculations. While the discussions throughout 2024 highlighted the potential benefits of deeper economic integration with the EU, the government's decision

to defer indicates a preference for political caution, perhaps informed by the mixed sentiments among the Czech electorate.

## The Fight Against EU Carmaker CO<sub>2</sub> Fines

Facing the EU's stricter carmaker CO<sub>2</sub> emission fines that are scheduled to take effect in 2025, the Czech Republic joined forces with Germany, Italy, France, Austria, Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia to lobby for more lenient regulations. This marked a major point of contention between the EU and the Czech Republic's automotive sector, which accounts for roughly 9% of the Czech Republic's GDP and over a quarter of its industrial output.

The debate has been fueled by concerns from Škoda, the nation's leading carmaker, which warned of potential job losses and production cuts if emission standards are tightened prematurely. Because of the industry's importance to the country's economic health, Czech officials stressed that overly stringent fines could stifle growth and destabilize both the automotive sector and its vast supply chain. As 2025 approaches, many expect more vigorous negotiations at the EU level, with the Czech Republic

aiming to safeguard domestic economic interests.

## Treaty Between the Czech Republic and the Vatican

While economic and environmental debates dominated headlines, October 24 marked a diplomatic and cultural milestone: Prime Minister Petr Fiala met with Vatican Secretary of State Pietro Parolin in Prague to sign a long-awaited treaty between the Czech Republic and the Holy See. This agreement concluded two decades of on-and-off negotiations, making the Czech Republic one of the last EU member states to finalize such a treaty with the Vatican. The move underscores a redefinition of the Catholic Church's position in a country where a majority of the population is historically atheist or non-religious. Commentators suggest that, beyond formalizing legal and property issues, the treaty reflects a subtle shift in church-state relations – one that may signal a broader openness toward religious institutions in national discourse.

## EU Parliamentary Elections

The 2024 European Parliament elections in the Czech

Republic offered a stark reminder of the country's widening political rifts and a growing electorate discontent with traditional parties. At 36.45%, voter turnout reached its highest level in any European election since Czech EU accession, reflecting a public increasingly aware of how decisions in Brussels affect national policies – especially concerning security, the energy sector, and economic reforms.

Former Prime Minister Andrej Babiš and his ANO 2011 movement capitalized on this sentiment, capturing 26.14% of the vote and securing seven seats. Building on the party's gains in regional elections, ANO's decision to leave Renew Europe and co-found Patriots for Europe signalled an explicit pivot toward a more sovereignist or eurosceptic posture. This realignment resonates with the populist narrative Babiš has cultivated domestically, painting the ruling SPOLU coalition as out of touch with Czech needs – particularly regarding surging living costs, EU regulatory pressures, and the government's robust support for Ukraine.

By contrast, the SPOLU coalition (comprising the Civic Democrats, KDU-ČSL, and TOP-09, with support from the centrist STAN movement) experienced a drop in seats, ending with six – an

outcome widely interpreted as an erosion of trust in pro-EU, centre-right governance. Populist and eurosceptic forces, represented by Přísaha a Motoristé and Stačilo!, each secured two seats, confirming a broader shift toward scepticism of Brussels's influence and, more recently, war fatigue over continued Czech support for Ukraine. Smaller party coalitions – STAN-SLK (two seats), the Pirate Party (one seat), and SPD and Trikolora (one seat) – underscored a fragmented electorate, with multiple movements staking claims on different aspects of domestic or EU policy.

The Czech Republic's election results must also be seen in the context of a deteriorating Visegrád Group (V4) dynamic. While once united in championing certain regional interests within the EU, the Czech government's firm stance in supporting Ukraine alienated both Hungary and Slovakia, which, by late 2024, had pressed for a more conciliatory approach toward Moscow. This discord has left the V4 effectively split, with Prague increasingly isolated from its traditional neighbours. However, based on current trends, the Czech Republic may join its neighbours' stance on Ukraine when and if a populist or "peace now" government emerges

in 2025.

Additionally, Andrej Babiš and other Czech eurosceptic leaders have begun echoing the "peace" rhetoric advocated by pro-Russia or Russia-tolerant actors across Europe. Although Babiš's attempts to portray President Petr Pavel as a warmonger failed during the 2023 presidential contest, the evolving landscape – punctuated by the reelection of Donald Trump in the United States – may strengthen populist calls for ending support to Ukraine if global pressure to negotiate with Russia intensifies. Against a backdrop of voter fatigue and dissatisfaction with domestic reforms, these narratives could gain further traction, shifting Czech foreign policy closer to that of Hungary and Slovakia.

These European election outcomes foreshadow significant challenges for Prime Minister Petr Fiala and the governing coalition in 2025. Domestically, the coalition already faces an unpopularity crisis and a shrinking parliamentary majority – exacerbated by the withdrawal of the Pirate Party. Simultaneously, ANO 2011's growing momentum and its potential alliance with the right-wing SPD raise the prospect of a government more critical of Brussels, support for Ukraine, and deeper EU integration. A strong

ANO-SPD government could also recast Czech relations with Russia, aligning Prague with the so-called "illiberal democracies" of Central Europe. In such a scenario, only Poland remains firmly in the pro-Western camp amongst the Visegrád Four.

## Year in Review

The Czech Republic stands at a crossroads, with the events of the past year illustrating the tension between deeper integration and national caution. The rekindled debate over euro adoption highlighted both aspirations toward economic alignment with the EU and lingering concerns about economic readiness. Intensified clashes over stricter CO2 fines underscored the Czech Republic's need to protect its critical automotive industry while still engaging with EU environmental objectives. A landmark treaty with the Vatican signalled a cultural and diplomatic milestone, reflecting changing church-state relations in a historically secular society. Most consequential, however, were the European Parliament elections, which exposed a fractured electorate, swelling support for populist forces, and a Visegrád Group in disarray. As 2025 approaches, the course of Czech

politics—and its place in Europe—will hinge on whether the country embraces a more eurosceptic turn or reaffirms its pro-Western commitments.

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Caitlin Zhang

# Denmark

Population  
5,993,317  
Unemployment Rate  
3.0% (Aug–Oct)  
GDP Per Capita  
71,970 USD  
EU Status  
EU Member

## DENMARK

Caitlin Zhang

### Introduction

Denmark's 2024 has been a year of significant change, marked by a royal succession, geopolitical tensions over Greenland, and a robust commitment to international security. From King Frederik X's historic ascension to Denmark's assertive stance against U.S. Arctic interests and its continued military and humanitarian support for Ukraine, the nation has reinforced its role as a key player in global and European affairs. As Denmark prepares for the 2024 European Parliament elections, these events shape the country's political landscape and reinforce its strategic priorities for the future.

### A Historic Transition: King Frederik X Ascends the Danish Throne

On January 14, 2024, Denmark witnessed a historic moment as Queen Margrethe II abdicated after a remarkable 52-year reign. Her decision to step down, the first voluntary abdication by a Danish monarch in nearly 900 years, marked a pivotal transition for the nation. Frederik X, who had long prepared for this role, was formally declared king in a grand ceremony at Christiansborg

Palace, where Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen announced his ascension. The Danish monarchy remains widely supported, with recent surveys indicating that over 80% of Danes have confidence in King Frederik X and Queen Mary. Denmark's succession laws, updated in 2009 to introduce absolute primogeniture, ensure that the first-born child, regardless of gender, inherits the throne. As a result, Crown Prince Christian, the eldest son of King Frederik X and Queen Mary, is next in line. Queen Mary, initially met with skepticism as an Australian-born commoner, has gained significant popularity, bringing a modern touch to the monarchy while respecting its traditions.

### Denmark Asserts Sovereignty Over Greenland

On December 20, 2024, King Frederik X updated Denmark's royal arms for the first time since Margrethe II's modification in 1972. The change, widely perceived as a diplomatic message, was seen as a subtle rebuke to the president-elect U.S. President Donald Trump's controversial interest in purchasing Greenland, an idea that Denmark firmly rejected. In response to Trump's renewed rhetoric and the

growing international focus on the Arctic, Denmark has reinforced its commitment to Greenland's defense. The Danish government announced plans to enhance military infrastructure and security in Greenland, citing increasing tensions over Arctic territorial disputes and resource competition. By bolstering its military presence, Denmark aims to assert its sovereignty while addressing security concerns arising from external pressures. Despite the geopolitical tensions, Denmark has also expressed its commitment to maintaining strong transatlantic relations. Danish officials have stated that they anticipate working closely with the incoming U.S. administration on shared security interests, particularly concerning NATO and Arctic defense.

### Denmark Expands Military and Humanitarian Aid for Ukraine

Denmark has maintained an unwavering stance in supporting Ukraine amid the ongoing conflict with Russia. In December 2024, the Danish government allocated over \$292 million to strengthen Ukraine's air defense capabilities, a package that includes financial assistance for operating F-16 fighter jets. Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen

has been vocal in urging allies to remove restrictions on Ukraine's use of Western-donated weapons, advocating for their deployment in strategic long-range strikes against Russian forces. This stance reflects Denmark's broader commitment to ensuring Ukraine's ability to defend itself effectively. In addition to military aid, Denmark has established the Ukraine Fund, a long-term initiative providing assistance through 2028. The fund supports military aid, humanitarian relief, and reconstruction efforts, reinforcing Denmark's dedication to Ukraine's stability and sovereignty.

### Year in Review

Denmark's 2024 has been a year of transformation and strategic action. The country reaffirmed its sovereignty over Greenland, strengthened its military and humanitarian support for Ukraine, and transitioned to a new era under King Frederik X. As Denmark went through the EU elections, its commitment to international stability, security, and progressive governance remains unwavering. With an evolving global landscape, Denmark's proactive approach in asserting its interests and supporting its allies ensures that it remains a significant player in European and international affairs.

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Population  
Unemployment Rate  
GDP Per Capita  
EU Status

5,636,521  
8.1%  
53,756 USD  
EU Member

## FINLAND

Emilia Patalita

### Introduction

Finland's year in review illustrates a shift in the nation's decisiveness as a result of global challenges. A shift in dynamics has been shaped by security concerns, ambitions for energy independence, and evolving perspectives on historical territorial disputes, particularly in the region of Karelia. In light of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, Finland has been forced to reconsider a longstanding neutral position, requiring the nation to analyze risks associated with relying primarily on diplomatic negotiations and international agreements for security enforcement and a national defense policy. With growing concerns over autonomy, Finland is at a pivotal historic moment, driven by a need to adopt new strategic approaches that are more reflective of the complex, contemporary challenges facing the Finns. Amidst these modern shifts of perspective, Finland has simultaneously experienced significant advancements, particularly with successful integration into NATO following its membership and its emergence as a global leader in energy transition, in addition to a more nuanced cultural understanding of Karelia's occupation.

### Transitions in Energy

Amongst Finland's most notable advancements has been its emergence as a global leader in energy transitions in its quest to move away from fossil fuels. The Finns have set an ambitious goal of achieving carbon neutrality by 2035, illustrating their emphasis on renewable energy production on a global stage. This has been made possible by the expansion of clean energy infrastructure, such as the expansion of wind power across the country and the development of nuclear power reactors. Finland first gained global attention by launching Europe's first nuclear reactor in 2023, establishing itself as innovative for energy independence and sustainability. Finland's push for energy has been critical in assuring their sustainability without reliance on other, more divisive countries, specifically in the context of Russian oil and gas. The geopolitical tensions that have emerged as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the sanctions on Russian energy by European nations have reinforced Finland's commitment to diversifying energy resources and gaining sustainable energy independence. With this, Finland has diminished its reliance on Russian oil, ensuring independent

energy security by simultaneously increasing imports from other countries while increasing domestic renewable energy production. Through the expansion of energy production, Finland has set an example for European nations that are similarly transitioning towards energy independence as a reactive response to the war in Ukraine, highlighting the social, political, and economic advantages of the production of domestic renewable energy.

## NATO Integration

Highlighting Finland's accomplishments within its year in review is its successful integration into NATO following its installment as a member state in April 2023. Following World War II and the formation of NATO in 1949, Finland maintained a position of neutrality- what became known as Finlandization. For decades, the nation maintained a tradition of neutrality in global conflicts that emerged as a result of their close relations to the Soviet Union following World War II. Throughout the formation of NATO in 1949, Finland remained neutral and did not become a member state. However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 significantly altered Finland's security considerations.

The war underscored the risks of relying too heavily on neutrality or diplomatic agreements for national defense, prompting a shift in public and political opinion toward NATO membership. Gaining NATO membership in 2023 was a reactive measure to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which forced Finland to reconsider the integrity of its security in a position of neutrality, highlighting risks emerging from a nation that relies solely on neutrality or bilateral agreements as a strategy for national defence. The growing concerns of Russian aggression was a divisive factor in Finland's integration into NATO, and ultimately their decision to bind towards international alliance, marking a historic shift in both the political and individual stance on international alliance amongst the Finns.

## The Legacy of Karelia

The region of Karelia remains a historical and cultural issue in Finland as it continues to shape Finnish public discourse and government narratives. The territory, located east of mainland Finland and ceded to the Soviet Union during World War II following the Winter War, was formalized by the Treaty of Moscow in 1940. It remains part of Russia as The

Republic of Karelia and parts of the Leningrad Oblast. While the status of the region remains a historical and cultural issue rather than an active political dispute, the historical significance of Karelia continues to shape Finnish memory and national on the rightful claim to ownership of the region. During the Continuation War (1941–1944), Finland briefly occupied parts of East Karelia, but by 1944, Soviet forces had reclaimed these territories, forcing Finland to withdraw under the terms of the Moscow Armistice. For Russia, the region of Karelia has been integrated into its territory, making control over the land from their perspective rightfully Russian, with no validity of calls for negotiations or international disputes over its status. The region is significant for its natural resources and cultural heritage, remaining a crucial part of Russia's northwest region. While there are no current movements to negotiate the status of Karelia, the region's significance in Finnish history leaves an enduring legacy in the cultural legacy of the Finnish people. In a modern sense, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has shed light on Finland's territorial losses, where Karelia serves as an example of the consequences of Russia's expansionist agenda and the geopolitical threats that emerge.

Though the issue of Karelia is largely symbolic for Finland, it underscores Finland's previous position of neutrality and emphasizes the importance of NATO membership in support of territorial security.

## Year in Review

Ultimately, the shifts in Finland's geopolitical status emerged due to contemporary global challenges that have forced the Finnish to be decisive in their position. Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine has placed Finland in a position of vulnerability and forced the Finns to reactively fight modern challenges. Making great advancements in energy independence and sustainability, Finland has raised the bar for the European nations in divergence from Russian oil and gas. While the Karelia region has served as an example of the consequences of the Russian expansionist agenda, Finland's diplomatic advancements as a member state of NATO have strengthened their global integrity. Ultimately, these factors have illustrated Finland's ability to adapt to global challenges and to position itself as a key member in European security and sustainability efforts.

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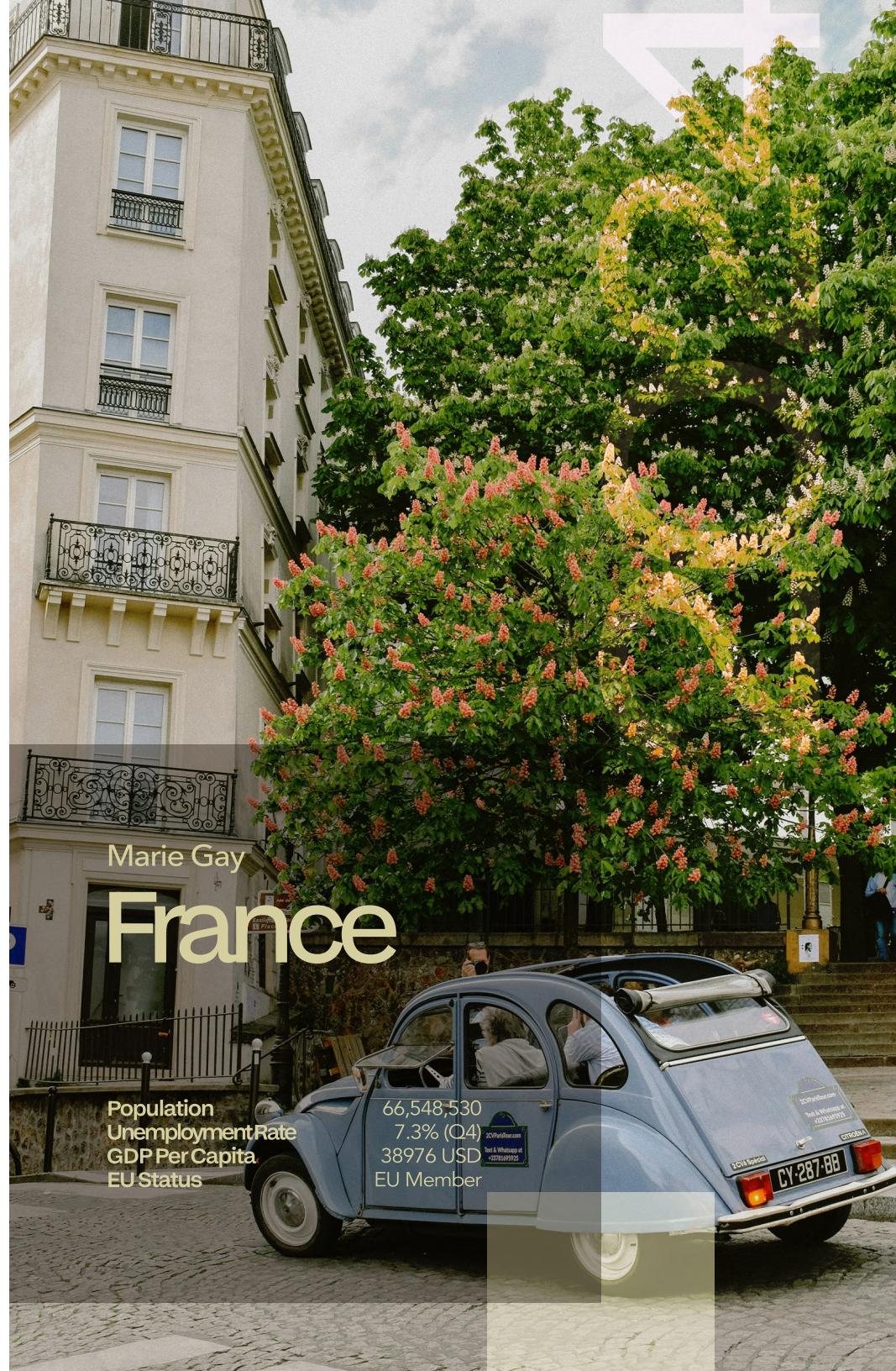
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## Introduction

France is a key global power with a rich political history, a strong economy, and significant influence in international organizations. It has been governed under the Fifth Republic since 1958, a system introduced by Charles de Gaulle to ensure political stability. This semi-presidential structure grants the president substantial authority, particularly in foreign policy and national defence. With a population of over 68 million and a GDP per capita of nearly 38975.58 US dollars, France is one of Europe's leading economies. And as a founding member of the European Union, it plays a significant role in shaping European policies on economic integration, defence, and foreign affairs. France is also a NATO ally and a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, reinforcing its position in global diplomacy. France maintains strong diplomatic and economic ties with major international powers, including the United States, Germany, and China. It also exerts influence in Africa through military operations and financial partnerships.

## France in the 2024 European Elections

In the 2024 European elections, France saw significant political shifts, with the far-right Rassemblement National (RN) emerging as the dominant party, securing 31.37% of the vote. This victory was a clear indication of growing anti-establishment sentiment, with RN's success being largely fueled by opposition to President Macron. Other notable results included the Besoin d'Europe Coalition, comprising Renaissance, Modem, and Horizons, securing 14.60%, and the Réveiller l'Europe Coalition at 13.83%. The left-wing La France Insoumise (LFI) and other centrist parties faced a notable decline.

For the EU more broadly, the results reflected a slight rightward shift, with the far-right gaining seats but still unable to wield significant influence. Meanwhile, the EPP and Social Democrats maintained their dominant positions.

Domestically, these outcomes prompted Macron to dissolve the National Assembly, triggering snap elections. France's fiscal instability and the rise of the far-right, particularly around immigration, security and social policy, is currently the driving force between voters shifting towards

right, left and far-right political institutions.

## Macron's Snap Elections & Fiscal Instability

France is currently facing a major fiscal crisis, aggravated by political instability. Indeed, President Emmanuel Macron's decision to call snap parliamentary elections led France into political and fiscal uncertainty, raising concerns about the country's economic trajectory and its leadership role in the EU. The dissolution of the National Assembly followed a strong showing by the far-right National Rally (RN), where Marine Le Pen's party secured 31.37% of the vote in the European elections, but the resulting parliamentary elections failed to deliver a clear majority, leaving France in a political deadlock. The unexpected victory of the left-wing Nouveau Front Populaire (NFP), combined with the weakened position of Macron's centrist alliance and RN's underperformance, has created an unstable legislative landscape and a lot of contentious political and economic perspectives. This instability complicates France's fiscal consolidation efforts, as these competing economic visions within a fragmented assembly threaten to render policymaking decisions

highly complex and inefficient.

France, one of the central pillars of the European Union, finds itself at a critical juncture as it grapples with economic instability and the threat of EU-imposed sanctions. The European Commission has launched an excessive deficit procedure against France, alongside six other member states, due to its failure to meet the fiscal constraints outlined in the Stability and Growth Pact. With a public deficit of 5.5% of GDP in 2023, far above the 3% threshold, France now faces the possibility of an annual fine of up to €2.5 billion unless it significantly reduces its deficit. As a founding member and the bloc's second-largest economy, France has long been at the heart of European integration, shaping policies on fiscal governance, economic coordination, and monetary stability. Its struggles highlight the challenges of maintaining economic convergence within the Eurozone, especially at a time when other major EU economies, such as Germany and Spain, have managed to rein in their deficits.

France's fiscal situation has broader ramifications for the EU's economic cohesion and governance. France's debt, already among the highest in the EU at over 110% of GDP, is expected to

rise further, and the country will likely face the EU's Excessive Deficit Procedure. This widening deficit is driven by reduced tax revenues, increased public spending, and rising debt servicing costs, now nearing €57 billion annually. (*Les Echos*)

In the 2024 European elections, the National Rally, led by Jordan Bardella, achieved a historic victory, securing over 30% of the vote and doubling the seats of President Emmanuel Macron's party. This crushing victory secures the far-right's dominance in French politics and strengthens its influence within the EU.

### Rise of Far-right in France and the Shifting Landscapes of Immigration Policies

The rise of the far-right in France has profoundly shaped the debate on immigration policies, pushing mainstream political discourse toward more restrictive measures. Under Marine Le Pen's leadership, the party has consistently called for stricter border controls, prioritization of French nationals in welfare and housing policies, and the potential for a referendum on immigration laws. If le Rassemblement National were to be in power, which, based on their recent results,

is not a farfetched idea, their rhetoric suggests that it would focus on immigration, reducing France's legal quotas for them and enforcing harsher deportation measures for undocumented migrants. Moreover, their program also suggests imposing stricter conditions for naturalization and family reunification. These proposals align with a broader nationalist narrative common for far-right parties, which frames immigration as a threat to national identity, economic stability, and security, a perspective that has gained increasing traction among the electorate in France and across Europe. Even centrist politicians, wary of losing voter support, have adopted tougher stances on immigration, as seen in President Emmanuel Macron's recent efforts to pass stricter immigration laws in an attempt to appease right-wing constituencies and maintain some voters.

The rise of the far-right in France mirrors the current trends all across Europe, particularly within Germany and Italy. Indeed, it is becoming increasingly common across Europe to have far-right political parties on the doorstep of power if not already in office, as seen in Hungary with Viktor Orban. In Germany, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) has capitalized on

public concerns about immigration, but also security with the highly traumatic event of the mass rapes in Cologne in 2016, following the 2015 migrant crisis and Angela Merkel's at the time chancellor decision to open Germany's border, welcoming around 1.7M migrants within. Despite Germany's historical roots regarding nationalism, the AfD recently scored a historic victory of 20.8% during the 2025 German federal elections, making them the opposition's largest party. In Italy, by contrast, Giorgia Meloni and her Brothers of Italy party have been more successful in integrating far-right rhetoric into the mainstream, presenting their hardline immigration policies as pragmatic rather than extremist.

### Macron's Shift from Diplomatic Mediator to Assertive Stance

In the early stages of the conflict, Macron tried to position himself and, therefore, France as a mediator between Russia and Ukraine while trying to find a feasible diplomatic end to the war, a task that proved to be meaningless. However, as the war intensified, Macron's approach shifted towards a stronger pro-Ukraine position, and he therefore emphasized the necessity for

stronger security guarantees for Ukraine and its immediate integration within the Euro-Atlantic institutions to maintain and protect its sovereignty. Macron has been a vocal advocate of European strategic autonomy, which would be aimed at an independent EU defence strategy while still being complementary to NATO. He has called for a European-led security force, though this proposal has faced resistance from other EU nations, including Germany, which emphasizes NATO's central role in European security. On the topic of NATO expansion, Macron has been very supportive of Ukraine's joining, arguing that it is a means to enhance European security while simultaneously deterring Russian aggression opportunities. However, these efforts rely heavily on the president in office and the fragmentation of the National Assembly's decisions; therefore, the political future of France's foreign policy, particularly concerning the Russia-Ukraine war, could change if opposition parties like the National Rally (RN) gain power. Such a shift might lead to a more isolationist stance, potentially reducing support for Ukraine and advocating for a reevaluation of France's commitments within NATO and the EU.

## Year in Review

France finds itself once again in a state of political and economic instability. Frequent government changes and persistent fiscal challenges continue to strain the country, demanding strong leadership and decisive governance. Adding to this volatility, the growing support for the far-right in the polls reflects deep social discontent among French citizens. The sharp contrast between far-right victories in the European elections and the near far-left success in the National Assembly elections underscores the increasing difficulty in reaching a national consensus on navigating these crises. On the international stage, however, France has taken a firmer and more consistent stance on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, demonstrating stability in its military and diplomatic commitments. Looking ahead, the 2027 presidential election will be a pivotal moment for the country. With Emmanuel Macron unable to seek a third term, the French political landscape is poised for significant change.

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## Introduction

As a former Soviet Socialist Republic and key piece of Russia's traditional sphere of influence, Georgia's wavering relationship with the Kremlin has been a defining feature of the nation's existence ever since gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Throughout the past few decades Georgia has walked a tedious line between Russia and the ultimate aspiration to join the European Union, resulting in broad periods of interchange between governments that are Russia-friendly and those seeking deeper partnerships with the West. In fact, Georgia has experienced two direct armed conflicts with Russia ever since achieving independence (the War in Abkhazia of 1993-1994 and the Russo-Georgian 2008), both over the status of the breakaway states Abkhazia and South-Ossetia which make up roughly 20% of Georgia's total territory and have been occupied by Russia ever since. These two conflicts are largely interpreted as Russian attempts to intervene in Georgia's aspirations to join the EU or NATO by maintaining a military presence and undermining Georgia's territorial integrity. In 2024, the major narrative in Georgia was top-down rapprochement with

Russia led by the ruling party Georgian Dream and subsequent grassroots resistance led by the Georgian people. With the passing of a Russian-style "foreign agents law" that stifles dissent from civil society groups and fraudulent parliamentary elections that have entrenched Georgian Dream's position and led to the halting EU accession negotiations, the Georgian government has unequivocally taken major strides towards Russia over the past year. These moves from the Georgian government have been met with fierce resistance, with the fraudulent parliamentary elections in October and subsequent postponement of EU accession negotiations producing mass demonstrations that have rocked the nation and continue to this day.

To understand these dramatic developments of the past year, one must consider the background of the Georgian Dream party and the disinformation bubble that it operates within. The Georgian Dream party was founded in 2012 by Bidzina Ivanishvili, the richest man in Georgia who reportedly made his vast wealth in Russia following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Under Ivanishvili's watch, Georgian Dream has been in power since 2012 and has made sharp pivots away from the West and

towards Russia while appeasing the Georgian-majority that supports EU membership with empty pledges and promises. However, across 2024 Ivanishvili and Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze have become much more relentless in unleashing propaganda campaigns against the West and in favour of the Kremlin. The narrative pushed by Georgian Dream is predicated on the notion that deep-state Western actors are actively working to undermine Georgian interests and pull Georgia into unnecessary conflict with Russia. The catchphrase that embodies this conspiratorial campaign is the "Global War Party", which posits that a clandestine entity underpins all Western states and institutions with its main pursuit being international destabilization through military conflict to weaken states like Georgia. Accompanying the Global War Party is the concept of "liberal fascism", a theoretical ideology that Kobakhidze uses to describe the influence of moralist woke ideologies perceived to be pushed onto Georgian culture and nationhood by foreign-funded NGOs (which are of course, serving the Global War Party). Within this context, across 2024 the Georgian Dream party has been able to draft policies favourable to Russia while building mistrust in Western

institutions in typical conservative-populist fashion. Public opinion on these matters is fairly difficult to measure, because while approximately 80% of Georgians support EU accession, narratives like these that exploit Georgia's national traumas retain a firm grip on the minds of many. Additionally, several major news sources in Georgia are at least partially state-owned meaning that accurate representations of mass public opinion can be hard to come by. Nonetheless, mass protest speaks for itself.

## Kremlin-Style "Foreign-Agents" Bill

The Georgian Dream party, which has been in power since 2012, has displayed a massive complex about NGOs, specifically those that are Western in orientation. In a striking speech in April of 2024, oligarch and founder of GD Bidzina Ivanishvili launched bold accusations against NGOs, claiming them to be comprised of a "pseudo-elite nurtured by a foreign country", that they already attempted to instrument a revolution in Georgia by backing Mikheil Saakashvili's pro-Western government in the 2000s (who is currently serving a prison sentence in Georgia), and that they ultimately

serve the Global War Party who are actively working to rid Georgia of its culture and bring the nation back under dictatorship. This speech was given amidst GD's announcement earlier that month that they would introduce new legislation that required NGOs who receive more than 20% of their funding from a foreign nation to label themselves as "foreign-agents". According to a report by the Asian Development Bank in 2020, NGOs in Georgia receive over 90% of their funding from foreign donors or development agencies, which in effect will outlaw all independent advocacy and assistance outside of the government's oversight. The bill is practically identical to Russian legislation enacted in 2012 leading to the Georgian rendition being widely labelled as a "Kremlin-style bill".

These developments sent shockwaves of fear and outrage across the nation, pushing protestors to take to the streets of Tbilisi for 3 months straight. Civil Georgia, a news site partly funded by the National Endowment for Democracy (an American NGO), reported on protestors championing the slogan 'Yes to Europe, no to Russian Law' and waving EU flags, Georgian flags and Ukrainian flags in front of Georgian parliament. While the

Georgian Public Broadcaster acted in many cases as an outlet for Georgian Dream's rationale for the Russian law, on the contrary the Georgian masses delivered a powerful display of solidarity in political values and priorities. The protestors were met with harsh repression, as the Freedom House reported that they were "deeply concerned about the threats and attacks against Georgian human rights defenders, journalists, opposition figures and their family members" along with "the ongoing repression and violence against peaceful demonstrators who have filled the streets of Tbilisi to oppose this bill." The passing of the foreign agents law was a massive blow to Georgia's EU ambitions, as it would violate the EU's criteria surrounding commitments to democratic governance. In fact, several European ministers and members of Parliament condemned the Georgian government for introducing the Russian-style law and cracking down on peaceful protests in response to the bill, as reported by the independent Georgian online news site 'On.ge'. The European Parliament presented a resolution in late April urging the Georgian government to reverse discussions surrounding the proposed law and revert to following the path to

EU membership, however to no avail as Georgian Dream outright ignored the request of one of the EU's highest governing bodies. The then-President of Georgia and leader of the opposition party Salome Zourabichvili vetoed the proposed law in May, but Georgian parliament overturned her attempt thus sealing the bill's legislation and Georgian Dream's consolidation of state power. While the Kremlin-style law was a decisive move from Georgian Dream's playbook, this was only the beginning of a much greater shift that would come to be demonstrated in the following months.

### Fraudulent Parliamentary Elections and Mass Revolt

As Georgian Dream managed to successfully implement the foreign agents law and thus signal their decisive allegiance with the Kremlin, Georgian civil society, international observers and foreign states all noted the incredibly high stakes of Georgia's parliamentary elections in the months leading to October. A few weeks before the election, Civil Georgia described the race as a "referendum of choice between Europe and Russia." In the months leading to the election several Western-oriented parties

agreed to form alliances in solidarity against the increasingly autocratic tendencies of Georgian Dream no matter the parties' various internal differences. The pro-European segments of Georgia knew exactly what was riding on this election. To this end, in June the European People's Party (EPP) even endorsed a coalition of the United National Movement, Girchi - More Freedom and other Georgian parties under the title of the Declaration of Unity in a cited effort to "protect Georgia's path towards European integration". A few days before the October 26th election date tens of thousands of Georgians flooded the streets of Tbilisi to showcase the public's strong will to join the EU, singing the national anthem and the EU's anthem, Ode to Joy, translated in Georgian. Despite the mass demonstrations in Tbilisi, the election was expected to be close with different polls showing both narrow leads for Georgian Dream and the sum of opposition parties that could form a coalition government. In similar fashion to other populist parties across the world, Georgian Dream finds most of their support in Georgia's rural areas, whereas the pro-EU parties are strong in the capital and other relatively large urban areas. Therefore while the pre-election demonstration in Tbilisi was highly

symbolic, these sentiments were still not necessarily reflective of the nation as a whole. Nonetheless, the parliamentary elections were not fair.

Upon the Central Election Commission declaring Georgian Dream's "victory" on October 26th with 54.8% total votes, President Salome Zourabichvili almost immediately declared the elections rigged and called on Georgians everywhere to fight back through relentless but lawful protest. The day following the release of the election results Georgia Today reported on several accusations of election-rigging including ballot-box stuffing, physical intimidation tactics outside of polling stations and the breakdown of the voting process at overseas stations (the Georgian diaspora was considered strongly against Georgian Dream's drift towards Russia) among many other illegal election practices. Observers noted that election interference in all forms was most noticeable in rural areas outside of Tbilisi, consistent with Georgian Dream's core voter base. In late November, after protests had been occurring for one month straight, the European Parliament released a detailed report calling on MEPs to reject the election outcome and order them to be re-run a year later due to widespread "significant

irregularities" in the democratic process. As a result, Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze declared the suspension of all EU accession talks until 2028 in a move meant to be retaliatory against perceived Western influence in Georgia's internal affairs. This move from Kobakhidze completely changed everything; turning the mass protests into an all-out national movement to save the country. More and more people rushed to the streets every single day in the coming weeks, but this time with lasers and fireworks to point directly at Tbilisi's parliament building instead of slogans and flags. As the protests intensified, so did the state's willingness to resort to violence as a means of quelling the unrest. Most notably the leader of Georgia's main opposition party Nika Gvaramia was beaten unconscious in his own office and carried out into a police car by riot police as part of a wider campaign to forcibly remove the opposition. The entire month of December was marked by brutal violence at the hands of the riot police, as they targeted and beat multiple journalists amidst the chaos and hospitalized several protesters, especially via head injury. While all of this state-sponsored violence was transpiring, Kobakhidze doubled-down and entirely

rejected any claim of election fraud by standing on an alleged OSCE report dismissing several of the allegations, as reported by the state-owned Georgian Public Broadcaster. Fast forward to the end of December and Zourabichvili had been officially replaced by Georgian Dream's president pick and former Manchester City footballer Mikheil Kavelashvili, despite Zourabichvili refusing to make way and maintaining that she is the only legitimate President of Georgia. The protests continue to this day, but as more time passes since the election and protestors get worn down by the monumental challenge ahead of them, Russia can all but celebrate the certain death to Tbilisi's aspirations to join the EU.

## Year in Review

2024 is a year that will go down in Georgian history books as a turning point in their nation's existence. For a while it seemed as though Georgia's Westernization project was on the path to success; if not achieving accession into the EU, at least reducing insistent issues like corruption, political repression and government-censored press. Believe it or not, Georgian Dream was once nominally committed to achieving these ideals. However,

the past couple of years of Georgian Dream-rule have shattered this nation's hope. In truth, Georgia was hanging on by a thread during all of 2024, as the government seized more power step by step and managed to survive the mass protests on every single occasion no matter the foreign statements or international media coverage. The sheer amount of public demonstrations in 2024 against countless examples of Russian encroachment into Georgian domestic life is unbelievable, yet the will of the people has been thwarted by state power and the unwillingness of foreign states to offer any real support to Georgia. After all, the international community has much bigger issues to address vis a vis Russia, essentially leaving Georgians and their EU hopes to dry. With Donald Trump withdrawing funding from USAID and thus weakening any NGOs that could offer material support for democratic causes in Georgia, the future certainly looks bleak. Nonetheless, no matter the outcome of the ongoing protests, the future generations of Georgia will not forget these events; and that is something to be hopeful for.

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Paul Phanachet

# Germany

Population  
Unemployment Rate  
GDP Per Capita  
EU Status

84,746,132  
3.3%  
55,521 USD  
EU Member

GERMANY

Paul Phanachet

## Introduction

"Discontent" is the theme for Germany in 2024. There was great discontent in politics as Germany went through the Collapse of the Scholz government coalition. There was discontent among the people, which gave a sizable rise to the Far-right movement led by the Alternative für Deutschland Party in the June 2024 European Elections.

## All Quiet on the Economic Front

It is nothing new that Germany's economy has struggled since the 2020 Pandemic, followed by Russian sanctions, notably on energy, at the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict in 2022. Among EU countries, Germany's average electricity price for household consumers ranks the costliest at €0.40 per kWh for the first half of 2024. A chief of one of Germany's leading energy companies expressed the concern on the Financial Times that the "German industry is unlikely to recover to pre-Ukraine war levels as elevated prices from imported liquefied natural gas have put Europe's largest economy at a 'disadvantage.'" With a recession in 2023, The Guardian reports

on falling real wages from pre-pandemic predictions by 4% between April 2022 and March 2023. The 2024 economy remains largely indifferent, prompting more decisive actions from the Government.

In that regard, the Scholz government subsequently faced a dilemma: increase its deficit spending to subsidize the economy or commit to austerity measures to cut spending. These decisions and discussions had substantial political impacts, leading to the collapse of the German coalition under Olaf Scholz.

## The Collapse of the Olaf Scholz Government Coalition

Undoubtedly, the biggest news from Germany in 2024 is the sudden collapse of the coalition government between Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD), Die Grünen (Greens), and the Freie Demokratische Partei (FDP). This "Traffic-light" Coalition, named for the Red, Green, and Yellow colours of the parties that make up the coalition, has been in power since the 2021 General election. Additionally, it was the first coalition since the departure of Angela Merkel, the past leader of the CDU and past chancellor of Germany.

The Traffic light coalition's collapse, only less than a year away from the expected general election, demonstrates the discontent and the "turning point" of the Scholz/SPD leadership and contrasts well with the longevity of the previous Merkel/CDU-led government.

Scholz was under heavy criticism for his poor performance in dealing with the multifaceted crises of the cheap energy substitution, rising cost of living, and increased government debt facing Germany and the European Union. Although it was hardly Scholz alone who was responsible for the collapse of the coalition. Another key antagonist to the existence of this government was Christian Lindner, the FDP leader. On November 6th, Scholz fired Lindner from the position of Finance Minister. The decision was not unexpected, but rather a long overdue endeavor. Scholz and Lindner disagreed over economic policies for Germany, as the country had come under pressure from the Energy Crisis following the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the ever-increasing economic competition from China. Scholz's plan to tackle the two-year-long economic contraction in Germany was to cap and subsidize the cost of energy for companies in hopes of increasing the appeal for businesses to invest in the country. Scholz's SPD also

pushed for increasing aid to Ukraine from €3 billion to €15 billion. However, a week before Lindner's sacking, a leaked FDP document outlines a solution that includes public spending cuts, lower taxes, and less regulation, especially regarding the green transition. Lindner pointed out that the SPD plans are unconstitutional due to Germany's "debt break" spending limit. The FDP's pro-market position strained the relationship between the FDP and the other coalition partners; moreover, the government had insufficient time before the following budgetary proposal. Thus, in his November 6th speech, Scholz justified the sacking of Lindner on the grounds that the FDP leader's focus on short-term vision to help sustain FDP's voter shares in the next election. Quoting Scholz: "All too often, Minister Lindner has blocked laws in an inappropriate manner, [...] Too often he has engaged in petty-political tactics. Too often he has broken my trust."

As per German law, Scholz therefore called for a Confidence vote to enable the President of the Federal Republic to dissolve parliament and call for an early election if the chancellor loses. On December 16th, Scholz got the result he hoped for. Scholz lost the confidence vote: 207 MPs voted

"For," 394 voted "Against," and 116 abstained. This paved the way for an early election on 23 February 2025.

The debates before the confidence vote gave the parties a platform to campaign for the expected election. However, the polls have already suggested that the CDU and the AfD are rising in popularity, surpassing the SPD. Friedrich Merz (CDU) and Alice Weidel (AfD), although both from different parties, are expected to be tough on migration. The political landscape in Germany is undoubtedly shifting right; only the result of the February 2025 election will determine to what degree.

### EU Elections and the Prophetic Rise of Right-wing Politics

The European Union Parliament (EP) elections from 6th to 9th June 2024 were a tell-tale sign of the rise of right-wing politics in Germany. Although Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands/Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern (CDU/CSU) got the most seats (29) and vote shares at 30%, the AfD celebrated its unprecedented victory coming in second place for vote percentages at 15.9%. The far-right party narrowly overtook the incumbent

German Government leader in voter shares with the SPD, which only received 13.9%. Nevertheless, the proportional representation seat distribution in the EP gave both SPD and AfD 14 seats each. The CDU/CSU makes up the center-right-leaning European People's Party (EPP) Group, which also saw an overall victory and was the largest group in the EP. Earlier, on March 7th, the EPP announced their support for the incumbent President of the European Commission (EC), Ursula von der Leyen, to re-run again as the Spitzenkandidat (lead candidate) in the 2024 elections. Thus, with the EPP securing the largest group in the parliament, von der Leyen was able to secure her re-election as the President of the EC, meaning that Germany continues to have a significant role in determining EU policies, with the German von der Leyen as its president of the commission.

In a report by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation on the result of the EP election, the summary wrote that "[AfD] is establishing itself as a permanent feature in the German party landscape. It is no longer merely a protest and disillusioned choice, either, with voters also endorsing its far-right positions." The trend would suggest so. The AfD gained 5% since the 2019 EP

election. The AfD's celebration was full of talking points as the party successfully encroached onto mainstream politics and surpassed the SPD in this election. Demands by the AfD have become a reality as the months have passed since the 2024 EP election. The party doubled down on their main selling point that there are "real problems" in Germany, likely referring to immigration and economic hardship, and that for other parties to insult the AfD will not fix anything, said Tino Chrupalla, the AfD co-leader. Alice Weidel added that "We demand a vote of confidence and new elections... the people have had enough," which in hindsight came to fruition in late 2024.

The victory of the CDU/CSU, the rise of the AfD, and the fall of the SPD establish an institutional prevalence of right-wing politics since Scholz's SPD victory. It can be looked at as a discontent over the domestic affairs of the Scholz government being reflected in the supranational election. It can also be interpreted as a general degradation of the left movement in a turbulent Germany and the larger Europe. What matters about the EU election is that it signals a precedent for the further development of right-wing politics in Germany—from Merz's further

right-wing shift within the CDU to the rapidly growing AfD.

### Year in Review

As 2024 concludes, Germany continues to struggle with the issues it had previously faced in the years prior. The shortcomings of Scholz's 2022 vision for Germany, as outlined in his *Zeitenwende* speech, have caught up with him. 2024 is genuinely Scholz's unfortunate turning point. The EU election has made it clear that the people are discontent with the incumbency. The dissolution of Scholz's traffic light coalition illustrates the infighting within his government, which hinders the governance of Germany and the legacy of Scholz's leadership. This is without including the pressure from right-wing extremism. So far, the AfD was the primary concern for Germany's political establishment. However, in the coming future, the CDU's shift towards absorbing right-wing voters from the AfD may prove to be another point of contention for the left-leaning parties in Germany. Not to mention, the return of Donald Trump to the white house will have future ramifications to the US-German relations due to the President's America first policies. As the events unfold, 2024 seems

more like a prelude to a more complicated and decisive political arena for Germany in 2025. With the February 2025 general elections fast approaching, Germany will soon be at the crossroads of its own destiny.

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Nicholas Argyris Arruda

# Greece

Population  
Unemployment Rate  
GDP Per Capita  
EU Status

10,461,091  
9.8%  
25,620 USD  
EU Member

## GREECE

Nicholas Argyris Arruda

### Introduction

Greece experienced significant social, political, and economic transformations in 2024. The year began with a historic social change to Greek society through the legalization of same-sex marriage. In the realm of politics, the year ended with a significant shakeup of Greece's political landscape, with the collapse of the second largest political party SYRIZA. Economically, Greece experienced significant gains in national economic growth throughout the year; however, 2024 has also marked a growing cost-of-living crisis and a severe housing shortage that are proving to be significant challenges. At the European level, Greece's European Union (EU) election results witnessed a protest vote that showcases the nation's increasing concern and frustration with these economic challenges. While 2024 was a year of significant transformation for Greece, it also highlighted the economic challenges the country continues to face.

### Legalization of Same-Sex Marriage

On February 15, Hellenic Parliament approved the passage of Law 5089/2024, which amended

Article 1350 of Greece's Civil Code to legalize same-sex marriage. This bill received strong support from Members of Parliament (MPs), receiving 176 of 298 votes. This historic change has come following decades of struggle and advocacy from the LGBTQ+ community amidst the background of constant sociopolitical contention.

The prelude to this legalization began in January when Stefanos Kasselakis, the openly gay leader of the then-official opposition party SYRIZA, proposed his own bill for the legalization of same-sex marriage. Kasselakis called upon Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis and his governing party to enact the legislation, as Mitsotakis had expressed intention to legalize same sex marriage after his victory in the 2023 national election. Following political debate and amendment, Mitsotakis' government introduced their own proposal which received the support of Kasselakis and numerous other MPs.

While this legislation has been a historic success, especially considering the bill had unusual cross-party support, it was a contentious one. In the lead up to the vote, many members of Greek society, notably far-right political parties and members of the Greek Orthodox Church,

voiced significant opposition to the bill through protests. Despite the significant influence of the church, Mitsotakis' government made a firm statement in response to this opposition, stating that legalization is an important matter of equality. The vote even saw contention within Greece's political parties. Specifically, this vote saw the breakdown of party lines as no single party, not even SYRIZA, witnessed a unified vote for or against. Despite a majority vote in favour of the legislation, all parties saw MPs voting based on seemingly personal motivations.

Despite these setbacks, the passage of Law 5089/2024 is undoubtedly a significant transformation for Greece. Not only did Greece make history being the 37th country in the world, as well as the 16th in the EU, to legalize same-sex marriage, but also by being the very first Orthodox Christian country to pass such legislation. Greece's top news outlets provided positive coverage, particularly highlighting the noteworthy praise Greece has received from international media outlets across Europe and beyond the continent. While those who opposed the bill continued to voice their discontent after legalization, this largely dissolved after the bill was implemented

as law. Further, public opinion polls indicate that just over half of Greeks are supportive of this legislation, with only ~30% proclaiming outright opposition to the bill. Thus, significant portions of Greek society have celebrated this achievement of equality. The biggest victors are undoubtedly those who, after decades of fighting, can now legally marry the same sex in Greece. Subsequently, the first of these common law marriages occurred on March 8, with many others, including Kassalakis, quickly following.

### **Collapse of SYRIZA and Return of PASOK**

On November 21, after many months of internal party turmoil, Greece's radical-left political party SYRIZA collapsed. The party declined to the third largest party in Greece and subsequently lost their status as the official opposition.

SYRIZA's collapse began after their devastating defeat in the 2023 national elections against the governing centre-right New Democracy party. As a result of New Democracy's overwhelming victory, SYRIZA's leader Alex Tsipras resigned and triggered internal party elections. The party eventually elected Kassalakis as

leader; however, SYRIZA continued to be plagued with internal issues, such as the formation of factions, that lead to the departure of many members, including Kassalakis. With just 29 MPs remaining, SYRIZA lost the required number of MPs to hold official opposition status in Hellenic Parliament. This was the first time in Greek history that the official opposition lost their status without an election. Importantly, SYRIZA now holds just a few seats more than the independents and the communist KKE party, and their polling support has fallen below that of far-right and anti-establishment far-left political parties.

The centre-left party PASOK has risen as the second largest party and have taken SYRIZA's place as the official opposition. This is significant, as PASOK was traditionally the second largest party in Greece prior to SYRIZA's rise, before they collapsed in 2012 due to their poor handling of the 2008 Financial Crisis. Despite PASOK's rise, polling indicates that their support remains in single digits, in stark contrast to the high support of the current governing party.

Greek media has largely been uncertain as to what this change really means for PASOK, citing a potential return of SYRIZA

and possible difficulties faced by PASOK in maintaining its position as Greece's second largest political party. While Greece's political landscape has returned to its late 20th and early 21st century form, where New Democracy and PASOK dominate, it remains to be seen how significant the impact of PASOK's return will be on Greece's political landscape.

### **An Economic Paradox – National Growth Amidst a Cost-of-Living Crisis**

Throughout 2024, the Greek economy experienced significant growth, continuing the trend of national economic recovery following the 2008 Financial Crisis. Media has cited a booming economy with a 2.2% growth rate; a decrease in national debt and unemployment; an increase in GDP; as well as being ranked by *The Economist* as one of the world's top five economic performers. In summarizing the year's economic performance, Mitsotakis stated that "2024 was a landmark year for Greek business", highlighting a 50% growth of the small business sector since 2020, the growth of "retail... wholesale trade, catering, tourism, and tech" industries, and the "strengthening [of] industry and manufacturing."

Furthermore, the government introduced an optional six-day-work week for certain sectors on July 1, with the intention of further stimulating economic growth and increasing the personal spending power of workers who choose to opt-in. These economic developments have left Greece with promising economic prospects for 2025, with predictions from the Greek government and international organizations suggesting that Greece will see economic growth of 2.3%, further reductions in national debt, and GDP growth of 2.4%. Additionally, Mitsotakis has stated that his government will further improve "the business and investment environment, strengthening infrastructure, reducing bureaucracy and ensuring that innovations find their way to the market."

Despite the Greek economy's strong performance, the nation continued to face economic challenges throughout the year. The most significant of these challenges is the ongoing cost-of-living crisis and severe housing shortage, both of which have impacted the country's younger generation. This has largely been the result of devastating droughts and wildfires, which have been a continual challenge for Greece in recent years, and a wider

European economic downturn that characterized much of 2024. The impact has included a considerable rise in inflation, and the increase in prices of various products and services, most notably travel and food. As a result, there have been noteworthy changes in Greek spending habits, particularly sizeable reductions of household spending, compared to 2023.

While Mitsotakis has made a public commitment and notable efforts to combat these issues, protests erupted on November 20 in Athens and other major cities among those dissatisfied with the governing party's ability to deal with these economic challenges. In response, Mitsotakis has stated that his government will work harder in 2025, within the limits of the Greek budget, to actively combat and address these economic challenges. In addition, the government has faced criticism from international media and far-left political parties for the introduction of the optional six-day-work week. While these economic hardships remain and will most definitely play a key role in domestic politics in 2025, the economic recovery and performance of Greece, which is expected to continue throughout 2025, cannot be understated.

## The European Union Election

The EU election had important implications for Greece's domestic politics in 2024. Going to the polls to fill 21 seats in European Parliament, Greece experienced a voter turnout rate of 41.24% and a record high of 59% absentee votes this year. This is in stark contrast to the previous 2019 election's turnout rate of 58.69%. Despite leading this election, New Democracy fell short of their predicted 33% of the vote, only obtaining 28.3%. This is also significant considering that they had obtained 40% of the vote in the 2023 national election. Mitsotakis has thus expressed disappointment with the results, especially considering this is the first European Parliament election in Greece with postal voting, suggesting that a potential cabinet reshuffle and change of strategy could come in the future. However, Mitsotakis made it clear that his party has heard the people's message and will focus on making the necessary improvements to reobtain their support.

EU PARTY	GREEK PARTY	SEATS
European People's Party (EPP)	New Democracy/Nea Dimokratia (Νέα Δημοκρατία)	7
The Left in European Parliament (The Left)	SYRIZA (ΣΥΡΙΖΑ)	4
Non-Attached Members (NI)	Communist Party of Greece/Kommounistikó Kόμμα Elládas (Κομμουνιστικό Κόμμα Ελλάδα) Niki (Νίκη) Course of Freedom/Plefsi Eleftherias (Πλεύση Ελευθερίας)	4
Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D)	PASOK (ΠΑΣΟΚ)	3
European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR)	Greek Solution/Ellinikí Lýsi (Ελληνική Λύση)	2
Patriots for Europe (PFE)	Voice of Reason/Foní Logikís (Φωνή Λογικής)	1

Mitsotakis and other political analysts have referred to the results of this election as a 'protest' vote in response to domestic issues that have been put forward rather than those of the EU. PASOK, SYRIZA, and KKE leaders have especially highlighted this, using the election results as an opportunity to criticize the government, proclaiming that the people of Greece are frustrated with Mitsotakis' term. The domestic issue that dominated this election was the cost-of-living crisis, with 53.4% of polled voters citing this as

the primary influence on their vote. Further, those in more remote parts of Greece feel that their voices are unheard by the EU and have shaped their votes accordingly. Despite this, many believe that the EU can bring benefits to their livelihoods if their input is taken seriously.

This election was a crucial one for domestic issues. The results reflected the cost-of-living crisis that took priority over any other issue, both nationally and Europe-wide. While the political impact remains to be seen, it has certainly shown the Greek government that some adjustments will need to be made in 2025 to recapture these voters.

## Year in Review

2024 was indeed a transformative year for Greece. The year began with a historic and unprecedented social change with the legalization of same-sex marriage, creating a more equal society after decades of struggle. Just as the year began with a major change, so too did it end with a major shift of the political landscape, with the collapse of SYRIZA and return of PASOK as Greece's second largest party. Economically, Greece experienced a year of significant

national growth, while also facing a continually growing cost-of-living and housing crisis. EU election results are a clear indication that the Greek people demand these crises be addressed, which the government is now working towards. Greece, now being a more equal society with optimistic economic projections, will certainly face important political and economic developments in 2025.

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## Introduction

In 2024, the situation for Hungary and Europe at large has developed rapidly during the Year of Democracy, as over 4.2 billion people, around 65% of the global population, and approximately 65 countries head towards the polls. Hungary itself, undergoing municipal elections, saw historical results that surprised both domestic and international observers alike, resulting in the near defeat of Viktor Orbán's Fidesz-KDNP alliance across major cities.

Though close, the present trajectory has continued to exemplify Hungary as a country in defiance towards globalisation, liberal internationalism, and democratic norms. The Russo-Ukraine War, entering its second year of brutal, bloody fighting, has also signified an important strategic crossroad of the role of Hungary in the European Union (EU) and globally. Furthermore, looming US elections and a Trump victory foresees the return of an even more militant America, hostile to European interests, which could result in a general geostrategic isolation and uncertainty for Europe's nascent institutions.

In the latter half of 2024, Hungary, who assumed the presidency of the Council of the

European Union, was able to orient the overall direction of the European Union towards a conservative, if not illiberal, turn away from liberal internationalist values. Hungary's traditional isolation as the pariah of EU politics has not signalled the end of illiberalism in Europe, but perhaps shown the beginning of a new populist zeitgeist.

## "The Rise of European Populism"

Since 2016, the ascension of Donald Trump to the American presidency has left a deep rift in Atlantic relations, inciting a rise of populism and far-right extremism across the European continent. Viktor Orbán, who had first held the office of Prime Minister from 1998 to 2002, again re-elected in 2010, 2014, 2018, and 2022 respectively, has entrenched himself as the longest-serving prime minister of the country in recent memory. Orbán's legacy is divisive to say the least; to which some might claim he had created a kleptocracy, a hybrid regime, or even a mafia state. Hungary had in fact experienced significant democratic backsliding. Following institutional reforms under an Orbán-led Fidesz supermajority after the Hungarian 2010 elections, Orbán transformed Hungary politics into an uneven

playing field for opposition parties, which would resultantly produce consistent Fidesz electoral victories for 12 years straight.

Indeed, Orbán's authoritarianisation had long attracted negative media coverage, from the key domestic Hungarian news sources to reputable, international media outlets. The undermining of important democratic institutions, such as the independent judicial system and the freedom of media, all while turning a blind eye towards corrupt practices in favour of his own party, has only heightened democratic backsliding and popular discontent in recent times.

*So why has the immediate response of the European Union, as the model for modern democratic institutions, been so lackluster to Hungary's increasing authoritarianisation?*

Historically, this inertia can be attributed to the Haider Affair of the 2000s, when the Austrian far-right Freedom Party joined the government coalition, the EU would subsequently invoke Article 7 to suspend Austrian membership from the Union, including voting rights. This particular response by the EU had sent political shockwaves all across Europe, as member states were horrified at the thought in which a non-state

organisation could supersede a state's sovereignty in penalising its political direction. Ultimately, after strong reactions from member states, the EU would back down, setting a political redline, which limited the reach of the EU into the internal affairs of its member states. As a result, the Haider Affair had effectively de-armed the EU to reinforce any punitive actions on domestic political affairs, which Orbán's anti-democratic measures have only resulted in mild, vocal condemnation by the EU, without any tangible sanctions or penalties to back up its threats. This political capitulation has allowed for illiberal, populist figures like Orbán to entrench themselves into national politics, and resulted in a wave of far-right resurgence all across continental Europe. On another note, this legacy, obscuring the fact whether the EU is a federation or supranational organisation, has played a key theme in far-right politics. Eurosceptics have since used the EU question as a vehicle to curtail the power of the EU from within, in favour of reforming the union to become a weaker and subservient institution to member states.

But, so long as Orbán plays within the system, his policies and rhetoric has been tacitly condoned by the European

establishment, which, in turn, and despite foreign criticism, has allowed for controversial policy shifts. Since Hungary has become a tacitly tolerated oppositional voice in European Union politics since the 2010s, the EU is able to utilise Hungary over divisive issues, such as immigration, to allow for policy "concessions." Though Brussels would work hard to curtail the impact of the belligerent attitude and threat of Hungarian vetoes in the Council of the European Union from 2022, where the oppositional voice of Hungary on the War in Ukraine is more destructive.

### **"An Alternative to Supranational Europe"**

The 2020s has been a decade of international and domestic turmoil for a weathered Europe, only to face new crises from its Southern to the Eastern peripheries. Hungary, as such, has been able to lead a wider shift in European politics and far-right populist ideology.

Hungary, in this instance, has represented a subtle, yet wider shift of far-right politics, emblematic of this current time period, away from a previously secessionist, anti-federalist, anti-EU rhetoric, towards a soft eurosceptic (or eurorealist) faction playing within

the European Parliament. Far-right populist parties have since formed political blocs such as the European Conservative and Reformist (ECR), Identity and Democracy (ID), and, in particular, Fidesz's own Patriots for Europe (PfE).

Across Europe, far-right parties such as Le Pen's National Rally or Weidel's Alternative for Germany, have steadily reoriented party politics, growing from traditionally radical, fringe parties, to increasingly moderate, mainstream oppositional blocs in both national and European politics alike. Similarly, Orbán is effectively able to tap into wider grassroot discontent on EU domestic and foreign policy, especially drumming up issues regarding immigration, economic stagnation, climate change, and, most importantly, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, all for his own political purposes. Orbán has incessantly used anti-EU rhetoric as a basis for re-election, referring to the EU as an anti-Christian and anti-nationalist institution, yet Hungary has not, nor will it ever, pursue a 'Brexit' style withdrawal from European membership. Since, for one, Hungary benefits enormously from investments, grants, and funds from the European Development Aid, despite its shoddy political record.

In summary, as the first populist, illiberal government to seize an European country since 1945, Orbán is able to incorporate, if not lead, the tone and sentiment of far-right politics across Europe. The contemporary populist zeitgeist has turned away from the traditional abandonment of the united European ideal, but has marked a decided turn, with Hungary at the helm, as the voice and symbol of a reactionary backlash against Western liberal internationalism.

### **"A Crack in the Orbánist Facade"**

In the 2024 Hungarian local elections, Orbán's Fidesz conceded defeat in several key areas nationally, including, for the first time since 2006, the Budapest mayorship—a traditionally, strategically important Orbánist base of support. Furthermore, the newly formed anti-Orbánist Freedom and Respect Party, TISZA, took second place in the Budapest Assembly for the first time in Hungarian politics since the rise of Orbán, securing itself as the national opposition party to Fidesz. Though Fidesz has effectively undermined and skewed the electoral system, Orbán's near defeat with 28.68% against TISZA's 27.34%, each with

10 seats in the Budapest Assembly, has only reinforced the belief that not all is well after Orbán's decade-long rule. Nationally speaking, 14 of the 23 district mayors have also turned towards the opposition after a major sex scandal by the Fidesz mayor of Györ, Zsolt Borkai, broke out in national news, reinforcing long term, popular discontent on Hungarian policy under Orbán.

On the international stage, Orbán has also undertaken a self-destructive foreign policy path, with implications of its outcome consequential for Hungary's domestic politics. Even though Orbán retains decisive support amongst the nation's population with a strong approval rate of 57% in polls as recent as 2022 Orbán has tied his fate to a self-undermining strategy by publicly supporting the interests of China and Russia in Europe—not least by offering a concessionary stance towards Russia over the Ukraine War. As the self-professed oppositional voice in European institutions, Orbán is forced to maintain a strongman persona in spite of its unpopularity with European citizens at large, which has defined Orbán's own political rhetoric at home by "daring" to go against Brussels.

Though this oppositionist stance has not come without its material rewards. Firstly, Hungary

has become the central hub for cheap Russian gas in Europe, in spite of staunch European opposition and sanctions. Hungary has since become one of the cheapest countries in terms of gas prices in the whole EU area, which has largely suffered through an energy crisis. Secondly, Orbán secured a momental investment deal, worth multi-billion Euros, for the construction of a Chinese BYD electronic vehicle factory in Hungary, following President Xi's first European visit since the COVID-19 pandemic in May 2024. This investment has poised Hungary to become the new industrial hub for Europe, at a time where neither Germany nor France could effectively compete against America and China on the global electric vehicle market—of which Europe still lacks its own indigenous equivalent.

## Year in Review

A silver lining for Hungary under Orbán is that in a time of domestic political turmoil, international trade competition, economic volatility, and increased geopolitical tensions, Hungary has been able to steadily, and successfully maneuver both sides of the global camps, between Russia-China and the Atlantic alliance.

Since France and Germany are struggling to balance European commitments to domestic political stability, where both saw the breakdown of their domestic ruling coalition, Hungary's perseverance has been nothing less than miraculous, in spite of its historical condemnation to collapse under EU pressure.

The future of Hungary remains uncertain: could Orbán effectively hold on to power legitimately, or could the year 2025 be a decisive turnaround for democracy in his declining popularity—especially as the continent approaches a turning point in conflicts, such as the Russo-Ukraine War. But there is no hurry to discount the universal liberal values of democracy and the free market as of yet. The clear indications of the contradictory, self-fulfilling logic of Orbán's politics has finally caught up in a decisive crossroad, and given the right conditions as currently seen, could finally, and hopefully, reinvigorate civil society to once again retake Hungarian politics in the next elections. In the hands of everyday Hungarians are the weapons of illiberalism, but also hope, to which only democratically and peacefully wielded could signify true change under the torch of democratic values.

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## Introduction

While often seen as one of the most isolated nations on this planet, Iceland is a formidable fighting force at the westernmost edge of the European continent. Despite not seeking accession to the EU (European Union), Iceland remains a nation striving towards significant economic, environmental and social progress. For instance, Iceland has achieved notable progress in sustainable and financial policies. For one, national trials of a four-day work week yielded commendable progress, with minimal reports of burnout and widespread response of the integration of a collective work-life balance. Furthermore, the Icelandic carbon capture and storage company Carbfix received the Icelandic Award for Innovation in 2024. A year of such progress has unfortunately led to notable challenges. Ongoing volcanic activity has disrupted the Reykjanes Peninsula, home to a large percentage of the Icelandic population and a large majority of significant financial and industrial centers. Further, social stagnation has been experienced within the realms of women's and immigrant rights. This led Icelandic people nationwide to protest the inequities witnessed within

governmental policies. In terms of government, Iceland called an election – triggered by the collapse of the coalition government led by former Prime Minister Bjarni Benediktsson. The coalition faced significant disagreements surrounding core issues, which led to the governmental dissolution in October 2024, leading to a new election on the 30th of November 2024.

## Ongoing Volcanic Activity on the Reykjanes Peninsula

Since the year 2021, the Reykjanes Peninsula has been an epicentre of significant volcanic activity – activity following nearly 800 years of dormancy. This peninsula is home to over 30,000 people in the direct radius and almost 280,000 in the region. This includes major cities such as the capital, Reykjavik, and critical infrastructure, such as the national airport (which is the only year-round international destination airport) and several critical geothermal plants, which provide a majority of the Icelandic power source. The eruptions, which local experts have believed to have occurred for centuries, threaten Iceland's public safety and the local infrastructure and economy. For instance, recent

eruptions in towns such as Grindavík have caused mass evacuations due to increased seismic activity and subsurface magma movement. The Icelandic Meteorological Office (IMO) has issued frequent warnings about the potential for more significant eruptions, with experts forecasting another eruption as early as February 2025. This unrest has led to continual and extensive infrastructural damage, including roads, pipelines and energy facilities, which harms the country's reliance on energy independence. Further, lava flows, such as those endangering Keflavík International Airport, could disrupt vital transportation links and tourism, harming some of Iceland's most crucial economic sectors. The aftermath of the volcanoes, such as ash and toxic gases, pose health risks, reducing the general well-being of citizens and impacting evacuations and emergency response. While, as a result of the strategies for disaster risk management, death tolls have been significantly averted, long-term risk assessment for evacuated communities such as Grindavík remains uncertain. The unique geological landscape of the nation, while it poses a significant challenge, also provides substantial R&I (research and innovation) opportunities. The Reykjanes

Peninsula is the site of nationally and globally valued geothermal systems. Hence, the approach to handling this crisis is detrimental to the Icelandic people, businesses, government and the planet.

## Revisiting The March To Repeal The Gender Pay Gap In 2024

Ranked #1 on the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index for the past 14 years, Iceland is consistently and widely recognized for its efforts in gender equality and advancing women's rights. The reason for Iceland's achievement in this field is simple. The nation is rooted in progressive policies and substantial systemic change due to the government's deep commitment to fostering change and inclusion. Central to this wave of progress was the Gender Equality Act, which prohibited discrimination based on gender and ensured equal opportunity across all employment sectors. Stemming from this act was the Equal Pay Certification, introduced in 2017, which mandates that companies demonstrate they pay employees equally for work of equal value. This level of accountability and corporate responsibility significantly reduced the gender pay gap, bringing the percentage

to <10%, one of the lowest in the world. Iceland's efforts have also influenced a broader scope – with many countries in the EU looking to Iceland's Equal Pay Certification as a basis for addressing wage disparities in their respective policy. Despite the massive advancements, the fight for full gender equality persists. On October 24, 2023, Icelandic women organized a nationwide strike to fight for an end to unequal pay disparities and gender-based violence. Globally, thousands watched as women from all fields, including Prime Minister Katrin Jakobsdottir, left their positions and participated in a 24-hour strike known as *kvennaverkfál*. This protest sought to address why women (specifically foreign-born women) work in the lowest-paying fields despite the current labour statistics and call for an entirely equal future for the nation. This protest gained international reception, inspiring future marches and national demonstrations. While the strike primarily occurred in 2023, the long-lasting effects have continued into 2024 and beyond. For instance, legislation passed in Alþingi states that in 2026, all employers with 250+ employees must report any gender pay gaps. By 2031, this legislation would also extend to all small employers as well. This protest also sparked a

series of new legislative and cultural shifts targeting the root factors that led to the global gender pay gap. For one, the Icelandic government invested more in subsidized preschool education, which supports parents with children 2 and older for under \$200/month. Furthermore, Iceland implemented 12 months of paid parental leave, split equally between parents, to reduce hiring barriers for young women. These policies, while a step in the right direction, are just one of many actions that Iceland can do to reduce the gender pay gap.

### Iceland's Refugee & Immigration Policy

As a result of numerous global conflicts, refugee populations have skyrocketed globally, which has caused many EU and European nations to reevaluate both their refugee and immigration policies. Iceland is no exception. However, its current policy has caused significant discontent amongst members of the Alþingi (Icelandic parliament). Iceland's relatively rigid policies are shaped by adherence to international conventions, particularly the 1951 Refugee Convention and the Schengen Agreement. Both agreements focus on individuals'

safe and responsible flows across European borders. Throughout the past decade, Iceland has participated in UNHCR relocation efforts, providing asylum to displaced peoples in conflict zones such as Afghanistan and Syria. While the country's initial 'framework' for integration focuses on essential services, such as housing, education, and employment opportunities, Iceland is being challenged with a similar population. Thus, fewer resources and infrastructure means that many refugees face challenges, including barriers to housing and employment, as well as difficulty in the linguistic tradition – creating not just an economic and infrastructural barrier, but a social one as well. On the other hand, Iceland's immigration policy closely aligns with the Dublin Regulation, which assigns responsibility for processing asylum seekers to the first country of approval. While this was intended to streamline asylum procedures continent-wide, it is criticized as smaller countries such as Iceland often cannot manage a large quota of asylum seekers. The reliance on this regulation has frequently led to bottlenecks in the system, further complicating Iceland's efforts to accommodate and integrate new arrivals. Iceland's role within the broader

EU immigration framework has also been seen as a contentious relationship, with compliance to these regulations often being at the expense of domestic priorities, which in turn has a downward shift in the socioeconomic priorities of immigrants. Yet, despite this, the Icelandic government has sought to revise its policies as a result of both internal pressures and external demand to reform the socioeconomic integration and labour market participation for foreign-born populations, aiming to set a continental standard for the approach towards resettlement.

### 2024 Icelandic Elections Of The Alþingi

In November of 2024, the Icelandic public voted in nationwide elections for the Alþingi. This came amidst the collapse of the coalition government led by former Prime Minister Bjarni Benediktsson due to significant disagreements regarding core issues for national and international interests, from climate to refugee resettlement policy. The Social Democratic Alliance (SDA), led by incumbent Prime Minister Kristrún Frostadóttir, emerged victorious in the elections, securing around ¼ of the total seats (15/63) in the Alþingi – receiving 21% of total

votes, making it one of Iceland's closest and most competitive races in recent history. It is theorized that the SDA was able to make up a significant amount of traction due to nationwide dissatisfaction with the coalition's policy platform. The outgoing Independence Party, which the former Prime Minister had led, came narrowly behind the SDA, receiving 19.4% of the vote and 14/63 seats in the Alþingi. Despite this, the party drastically experienced a decline in voter support, likely attributed to internal disagreements and a failure to address voter concerns adequately. Following closely behind was the Liberal Reform Party, which received 11 seats with 16% of the vote, likely due to its role as a mediator party between the ends of the spectrum in Alþingi. With multiple parties now needing to cooperate in a more fragmented political landscape, the direction of Iceland's future policy is far from certain, making this a pivotal moment for the nation's governance.

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## Climate Action and Renewable Energy Expansion

Ireland entered 2025 continuing its ambitious drive for clean energy. The government's target of 80% renewable electricity by 2030 remains a centrepiece of climate policy. By early 2025, renewable sources were supplying around 40–50% of Ireland's electricity every month – for example, wind and solar provided about 39% of power in January 2025 (with wind alone contributing 32.9%). This represented significant progress, though analysts warned that hitting the 2030 goal on time will be challenging. A mid-2024 forecast suggested Ireland might only reach ~70% renewables by 2030, with the 80% target potentially delayed to 2032. Key obstacles have been planning delays and grid capacity, which in 2024 led to the curtailment of wind farms and slowed new project approvals. Ireland surpassed a major milestone of 5,000 MW of installed onshore wind capacity – over halfway to the 9 GW goal for 2030. Wind farms supplied roughly one-third of the country's electricity in 2024, underscoring their critical role. However, the past year also exposed bottlenecks. Grid constraints forced some wind

turbines offline at times, making 2024 "the worst on record" for wasted wind power, according to industry officials. To address this, the government has prioritised grid upgrades. €750 million from the state's asset sales was committed to electricity grid development in Budget 2025, aimed at strengthening the network for renewables and preparing for offshore wind integration. At the same time, Ireland's first utility-scale solar farms have come online, with solar PV capacity around 1.5 GW by 2025. Solar is rapidly growing (target 8 GW by 2030), complementing wind output during sunnier periods.

In 2025 the government continued to roll out its Climate Action Plan measures. A dedicated Accelerating Renewable Energy Taskforce is working to align local planning with national renewable goals and draft revisions to Ireland's planning framework now include regional targets for wind and solar to distribute projects more evenly. To incentivise new capacity, Ireland held its fourth Renewable Electricity Support Scheme (RESS-4) auction in late 2024, which procured about 1,334 MW of new projects (960 MW solar and 374 MW wind) – a 20% boost in renewable capacity at prices ~4% lower than previous rounds. Officials hailed this as

momentum toward 2030 goals. On the offshore wind front, 2025 marks the launch of Ireland's second offshore auction. The government approved a new 900 MW offshore wind site (the "Tonn Nua" project off County Waterford) to be auctioned in Q2 2025.

This follows the successful 2023 auction that awarded 3.1 GW of offshore capacity at competitive prices. Ireland is also planning for the long term – a Future Offshore Renewable Energy framework was published, targeting 20 GW of offshore wind by 2040 and collaborating with the EU and investors on port infrastructure upgrades to support this build-out. Despite these efforts, challenges persist. Wind and solar developers still face lengthy planning and permitting processes, and grid connection queues remain backlogged. The limited capacity of the transmission grid in some regions has meant that even as new turbines and panels are installed, not all their power can reach consumers. The government in 2025 is addressing this with regulatory changes (such as streamlined permitting via the EU Connectivity Toolbox) and by funding EirGrid's network expansion. Overall, the year so far has seen steady renewable energy growth and increased

state investment, keeping Ireland broadly on course for its green energy transition – albeit with a recognition that faster action is needed to overcome infrastructure hurdles and meet the 2030 climate deadline.

## Housing and Urban Development

Ireland's housing sector in 2025 remains under intense focus, as the housing crisis continues to challenge policymakers and the public. Home construction fell slightly in 2024, even as demand stayed high. Official figures show 30,330 new homes were completed in 2024, a 6.7% drop from the previous year. Notably, apartment buildings slumped by 24% amid rising costs and higher interest rates. This decline put Ireland behind its Housing for All target of ~33,000 units for 2024, exacerbating the shortage of homes. By January 2025, industry reports were forecasting that house prices would continue to rise due to the supply-demand imbalance. Property advisors noted prices climbed about 8–9% in 2024 nationally, and predicted a further 5%–8% increase in 2025 if economic conditions remain strong. In some regions, price growth last year approached 9%

(e.g. Dublin's second-hand homes rose 9.6%). With mortgage interest rates potentially stabilizing and the economy growing, buyer demand has stayed robust – putting even more pressure on Ireland's limited housing stock.

The government has taken a multi-pronged approach to tackle affordability. A 2% annual cap on rent increases in designated Rent Pressure Zones (RPZs) has been in effect since late 2021 and remains through 2025. This policy aims to protect tenants from extreme rent hikes, but its effectiveness is a matter of debate. While many sitting tenants benefited (average rent rises for existing renters were held to ~7% total since 2021), market rents for new leases have still surged. Advertised rents jumped 5.7% in 2024 nationally (on top of +6.8% in 2023), reaching record highs – the average asking rent is now about €1,956 per month, ~43% higher than pre-2020. In late 2024, the supply of rentals tightened again (fewer than 2,300 units were available to rent nationwide in Feb 2025, roughly half the pre-2019 norm). This undersupply drove double-digit rent increases in some areas (Limerick saw +19% last year). The contrast between controlled rents for existing tenants and much higher rents on new leases has

grown stark. As economist Ronan Lyons observed, "rent controls... have not solved the underlying issues" – open-market rents have soared ~50% since the rent cap was introduced, while incumbent tenants saw only single-digit rises. Lyons called the situation "clearly unsustainable," echoing calls by the OECD to allow more flexibility (e.g. permitting landlords to reset rents to market rates between tenancies).

In response, the government signalled plans to reform the rent policy. In early 2025, it began considering a new "reference rents" system to replace the RPZ cap when the current law expires at the end of 2025. This proposal, floated by the Housing Commission, would tie allowable rent increases to local market averages for similar properties (rather than a flat 2% cap). The goal is to give landlords more scope to cover costs and attract investment, while still preventing gouging. Large housing providers argue that strict caps have "choked supply" by deterring investment in rental projects. Indeed, Ireland saw a sharp drop in apartment construction and a withdrawal of some institutional investors over the past few years, partly attributed to limited rent returns under RPZ rules. Policymakers hope a revised

system in 2025 can encourage new rental development to ease the crunch. In the meantime, the social impact of the housing crisis is evident in rising homelessness: the number of people in emergency accommodation surpassed 14,700 in late 2024, an all-time high and has continued to climb in early 2025. This has added urgency for government action.

The state has accelerated programs to deliver affordable and social housing. A flagship measure is the Cost Rental scheme, which offers tenants long-term rentals at rents at least 25% below market rates. In February 2025 the government announced €168 million in funding to support 849 new affordable homes (686 cost-rental units and 163 affordable-purchase units) across 10 counties. This represents a significant scaling-up of cost rentals – over 2,640 cost-rental homes have been completed since the scheme's 2021 launch, with a pipeline of 8,600 more approved and in progress. The popularity of these units (often oversubscribed when available) shows the appetite for below-market options; officials noted the program's "overwhelming demand" and are aiming to expand affordable supply further in 2025. For first-time buyers, an Affordable Purchase scheme is helping deliver

discounted homes (the new €11.8m allocation in 2025 will assist 163 buyers), alongside the ongoing First Home shared equity scheme and Help-to-Buy incentives. Public-private partnerships are also being leveraged to boost construction. Under the Social Housing PPP programme, the government completed two bundles of projects (1,000 social homes delivered by 2021) and is now moving on Bundles 3–7, which are expected to provide around 3,536 new social homes with construction starting in 2025. These PPP bundles tap private builders to develop housing on public land, with long-term management contracts – a model aimed at adding capacity efficiently. By 2025, Bundle 3 was at the tender stage and others in planning, indicating a ramp-up of this initiative.

Additionally, the Land Development Agency has been partnering with developers to unlock large sites for mixed-income housing. The government's Housing for All strategy (2021–2030) set annual targets and increased funding for local authorities and non-profits to build social and affordable units; 2024 saw over €4 billion budgeted for housing, and a similar or higher level is expected in 2025. Early 2025 also brought regulatory tweaks – for

example, new rules to incentivize the use of vacant properties (a vacant homes tax came into effect) and reforms to speed up planning appeals for housing projects. In summary, the housing sector in 2025 is marked by intense efforts to catch up with demand. Price and rent pressures remain high due to Ireland's economic growth and demographic trends, but the state's interventions are gradually bearing fruit. Thousands of new social/cost-rental homes are in the pipeline, rent caps are being reevaluated to stimulate supply, and construction output – while having dipped in 2024 – is expected to rebound with continued government and private investment. The effectiveness of these measures will be closely watched as Ireland strives to improve affordability and overcome its housing shortfall in the coming years.

## Digital Transformation and Education

Ireland's digital economy and education sectors saw significant developments through early 2025, reflecting the country's dual focus on tech innovation and inclusive digital skills. As a favoured base for technology multinationals, Ireland continued to benefit from foreign direct

investment in tech. The national investment agency, IDA Ireland, launched a new five-year strategy in February 2025 aiming to secure 1,000 FDI investments by 2029, with over half targeted in regions beyond Dublin. Already, several global tech companies announced expansions in 2025. For example, Squarespace (website platform provider) revealed plans to create 120+ new jobs in Dublin over the next two years, which will bring its Irish workforce above 400 employees. The move was lauded by government ministers as a vote of confidence in Ireland's stable, business-friendly environment. Other firms in cloud computing, fintech, and biotech have similarly grown their Irish operations. In January, Australian ad-tech company Publift chose Dublin for its European base, aiming for 50 staff by the end of 2025. These expansions come despite a more cautious global tech climate and underscore Ireland's role as a European tech hub hosting giants like Google, Apple, Meta, Microsoft and many emerging companies. The tech sector's growth has prompted ongoing investment in STEM education and talent development to ensure a skilled workforce.

A major theme in 2025 is making sure the digital revolution

leaves no one behind. The government and partners have rolled out free digital literacy programs for adults, particularly focused on older people and marginalized groups. One flagship initiative is Hi Digital, a nationwide training program launched by NGOs (ALONE and Active Retirement Ireland) with support from the Vodafone Ireland Foundation. Hi Digital, now in its third year of a five-year plan, aims to train 230,000 older adults in basic digital skills – from using smartphones and email to online shopping through a mix of free online lessons and in-person classes. By 2025, the program has made substantial progress in bridging the digital divide for seniors. Similarly, libraries and Education and Training Boards (ETBs) across Ireland offer free or low-cost digital skills courses for adults, which thousands have attended to learn everything from internet safety to office software. The government's Adult Literacy for Life Strategy (2022–2027) also treats digital literacy as a core component, coordinating efforts to reach adults with literacy, numeracy, and digital skills needs. In late 2024, a new Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024–2033 was launched, highlighting the importance of

digital skills from early childhood through adulthood. By early 2025, community groups report improved digital inclusion, though challenges remain in engaging the hardest-to-reach adults. The commitment to provide "free digital upskilling for all who need it" is being gradually realized through these programs, which should help more Irish citizens access online services, employment opportunities, and social connections.

Investment in science and technology education has ramped up, recognizing that future economic growth and innovation depend on a strong pipeline of STEM graduates. Budget 2025 included the largest-ever education funding package (€11.8 billion), with targeted measures to boost STEM. One key initiative is a new bursary for trainee teachers in STEM fields to increase the number of qualified science, technology, engineering, and math teachers in secondary schools. The government is also funding free upskilling courses for existing teachers to get certified in high-demand subjects like physics, computer science, and chemistry. This should alleviate teacher shortages in those subjects and enable the rollout of new curricula (for instance, Coding and Computer Science are being introduced in more schools). At the student

level, special programs encourage underrepresented groups to pursue STEM. A notable example is the STEM Passport for Inclusion project led by Maynooth University and Microsoft, which by late 2024 had engaged over 5,000 female students from disadvantaged schools in STEM learning and mentorship. Thanks to this program – expanded nationwide in 2023 – 79% of participants said they now plan to apply for STEM courses in college, a huge leap from prior interest levels.

Initiatives like these, along with improvements in school labs and funding for university research, are strengthening Ireland's STEM talent base. In 2025, new Technological Universities and apprenticeship programs will also provide additional routes into tech and engineering careers, spreading opportunities across the country. 5G and Broadband Expansion: Building out digital infrastructure has been a government priority as part of Ireland's Digital Connectivity Strategy, which aligns with the EU goal of ubiquitous high-speed connectivity by 2030. 5G mobile networks saw major expansion in the past year. By Q3 2024, one operator (Three Ireland) reported 5G coverage to over 90% of the population across all 26 counties, and another (Eir) covered about

70% of the population in 600+ towns and cities. Vodafone's 5G network is also live in all counties, though with a more limited range focused on urban areas. The number of 5G subscribers in Ireland jumped 33% year-on-year, reaching 1.7 million users by mid-2024 as new handsets and services became available.

In rural regions, 5G signals are still not universal, but coverage is steadily improving as carriers upgrade more masts. The government's ambition is to have all populated areas covered by high-quality 5G by 2030. Through 2025 it is working on policies to facilitate this, including reforms to planning laws (to ease installation of masts and small cells) and sharing of state-owned sites for telecom equipment. Consumers can now consult ComReg's online coverage map to find which provider offers the best 5G in their locality, adding transparency and helping identify blackspots to fix. Meanwhile, the National Broadband Plan (NBP) – Ireland's initiative to bring fibre internet to every rural home – has gained momentum. After a slow start in 2020–2021, the rollout by National Broadband Ireland accelerated through 2023–24. By the end of 2024, the NBP had passed over 300,000 premises with gigabit-capable fibre, more

than half of the ~560,000 rural homes and businesses targeted. About 98,700 premises had active high-speed connections by late September 2024, and that number crossed 100,000 by early 2025. NBI is laying fibre at a pace of ~10,000 premises per month and asserts the project is on track for completion in 2026. All 1,000+ rural primary schools now have broadband through either fibre or wireless as interim steps (via the Broadband Connection Points program), ensuring students and communities can get online while waiting for fibre lines. The NBP's progress ahead of schedule was a rare good-news story in 2024, given earlier concerns about delays. In 2025, the focus is on sustaining this pace: by mid-year, roughly 50% of rural Ireland can order gigabit broadband and take-up rates in areas covered are exceeding expectations (often 40–50% of eligible premises subscribe within a year). This bodes well for hitting the milestone of universal high-speed coverage. Complementing the NBP, commercial telecom providers (Eir, Siro, Virgin Media) have also expanded fibre in towns and suburbs, bringing Ireland's overall high-speed availability to about 81% of households as of late 2024.

## Year in Review

In summary, Ireland's digital and educational landscape in 2025 is characterized by growth and modernization. The tech sector continues to thrive, attracting investment and creating jobs, while the state invests in the human capital needed to sustain that success – from coding in schools to adult digital upskilling. Infrastructure upgrades in 5G and fibre broadband are well underway, aiming to bridge urban-rural digital divides. There is a clear recognition that digital transformation must be inclusive: the government and partners are working to ensure that students, workers, and citizens young and old can participate in the digital society. As Ireland moves through 2025, it leverages its position as a tech hub to drive innovation, all while striving to equip its people with the skills and connectivity of the future.

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Aditi Malhotra

# Italy

Population	59,342,867
Unemployment Rate	5.8%
GDP Per Capita	39,003 USD (2023)
EU Status	EU Member

ITALY

Aditi Malhotra

## Introduction

A founding member of the European Union, Italy presently stands at the nexus of possible massive, critical, political and governmental metamorphosis in an environment already blemished by a migration crisis and existing responsibilities towards significant commitments made for transnational collaborative aspirations. Having hosted the 2024 G7 Summit and brought into effect what was anticipated to be an innovative migration management agreement, Italy underwent a year rife with substantial and complicated developments.

## G7 Summit

The G7 (Group of 7) has been a forum aimed at coordinating global policy on the matters of economics, international security, and other transnational issues since 1975. The 2024 edition of the G7 Summit was held in Apulia under the Italian Presidency and addressed broad issues such as the ongoing conflict in the Middle East; Africa, climate change, and development; Russia's war against Ukraine; migration; economic security; and AI within the context of energy and the Mediterranean region during the course of six

working sessions.

The Summit culminated with member-states adopting an extensive 'communiqué' elucidating the commitments made and initiatives established through the course of the conference. The conspicuous resolutions include the financial commitment of US\$50 billion made towards Ukraine, and the unanimous backing of the U.S. government's (potential) ceasefire deal with respect to Gaza and a call for increased humanitarian assistance.

In lieu of critical priorities, as espoused by the Italian Presidency, the Summit also featured, in collaboration with African leaders, discussions around Italy's Mattei Plan for Africa which hopes to "foster economic and strategic partnerships with African nations and institutions, [with the] African Development Bank Group [as their] main strategic financial partner." In a joint statement with P.M. Meloni, the President of the ADBG mentioned how the partnership "will deliver impactful development impacts across African countries, expand access to energy, tackle climate change, support food security, boost health services, and expand skills and jobs for the youth." As a part of the MPA, Italy and Algeria signed an agreement on "high-tech

regenerative agriculture" which entails a concession of 36,000 hectares of land by the Algerian government which is to be reclaimed for agricultural use and the creation of a production chain, representing the largest investment in sustainable agriculture Italy has ever made in North Africa.

The other overarching cooperative plan introduced during G7 Italia was the Apulia Food Systems Initiative hoping to "overcome structural barriers to food security and nutrition."

### The Migration Crisis & The Italy-Albania Asylum Deal

As a counter strategy to the prominent migration crisis, the novel Italy-Albania asylum deal, finalized in February 2024, is designed in such a way that it allows Italy to outsource its migrant crisis and processing of asylum applications to Albania, with the latter agreeing to house up to 36,000 migrants from "safe countries" rescued by the Italian Coast Guard and Navy each year for an expedited application process.

It is a unique model of migration management in that it established Italian jurisdictional enclaves in two Albanian towns.

After months of advocating and promoting the plan, and investing upwards of a billion euros in the construction of detention centers in the Balkan country (which is currently undergoing accession negotiations with the EU), what was advertised as, and expected to be, a revolutionary bilateral plan seems to be fast failing. The aforementioned detention facilities in Albania remain noticeably empty after two consecutive failed attempts on Italy's end, once in October and then in November, to send asylum-seekers to those facilities but being forced to reaccept them due to judicial rulings in the Court of Rome.

This sparked an attack by the right-wing Italian government on the judiciary with prominent conservative ministers quoting "political motivations" as the reasoning for the Court's rulings. At the core of the conflict, however, lies a ruling by the Court of Justice by the European Union, which deems only those countries with entire territories that are free of danger to be 'safe'. Ultimately, the court of Rome was obligated to follow CJEU rulings, and opposition parties continued to attack the asylum-deal as a complete failure, while Prime Minister Meloni, persistent in her original position, discussed migration issues with EU

counterpart Hungary in December 2024, "building up on the path opened by the Italy-Albania agreement" as both heads of state stressed "the importance to explore new ways to prevent and counter irregular migration."

The right-wing government in Italy, however, risks its credibility in light of its choice of immigration as a core campaign agenda and past public criticisms of excessive expenditure of public funds on managing the migration crisis.

### Constitutional Reform by Meloni

On June 18, 2024, Giorgia Meloni's draft bill, detailing an ambitious overhaul of the Italian Constitution, was approved by the Senate, receiving its first 'okay' and triggering a process of constitutional reform with potentially dangerous impacts and political imbalance. Christened as the "mother of all reforms" by the author and Italian P.M., the bill implies radical transformation of the Italian constitution, disproportionately tipping the scales in favor of the head of government. With institutional reform being one of P.M. Meloni's focal objectives, the bill introduces direct elections for the head of government and a change in

composition of both chambers of Parliament, significantly influenced by a new "majority bonus".

The eponymous "premeriato" is designed to grant more power to the office of the prime minister, and is being called out, although to no avail, as a power grab by Meloni's opposition and various detractors. The bill, if successfully implemented, would be done at the cost of weakening other democratic institutions and a fundamental illiberal shift in the systemic balance of the governance apparatus in place in the country. In a further wrinkle, another bill named "DDL Automania" was passed in the Italian Senate on the heels of Meloni's infamous bill which grants regional governments unprecedented independence at the expense of national unity and the bedrock principle of affording equal services to all citizens. It "speaks the language of differentiated autonomy" and comes with the potential of exacerbating vertical inequalities across the country.

Italy stands to face a future of democratic instability and noticeable losses of checks and balances in its political system if Meloni's bill comes into effect. Strengthening the power of the prime minister to the detriment of the guarantor functions of the head

of state would radically transform the Italian political framework in an undeniably unfavorable manner. EU Elections

P.M. Meloni's party, Fratelli d'Italia, or Brothers of Italy, accomplished a victory in Italy with an overwhelming majority of 28% in the 2024 EU Elections, as compared to the mere 6.4% secured in the preceding 2019 EU Election. Receiving a noticeable domestic boost while also taking up a powerful position in the EU itself, Meloni's triumph showcases a shift in the balance of power on, and further towards, the right.

Of the 76 Italian seats in the European Parliament, the Fratelli d'Italia, part of the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR); a centre-right political group; secured 24 of 76 seats. The Democratic Party as part of the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats followed closely, winning 21 seats in the European Parliament, maintaining its statistics from 2019.

Overall voter turnout in Italy, however, dropped from the previous elections by around 6 percentage points, a concerning and consistent trend across past EU Elections. Given the persistent shifts in voter turnout, and voting, trends in Italy with respect to the European Parliament indicates an alarming

inclination towards Euroscepticism in stark contrast to the country's staunch historical position favoring European integration, making for a potentially critical challenge for the nation in coming years.

## Year in Review

In summation, the major developments across 2024 in, and consequent challenges posed towards, Italy include the persistent migration crisis, to which the failing and deleterious Italy-Albania deal has been added; the potential of severe, foundational political alterations and variance resulting in anti-democratic governance changes; and the additional weighty commitments made by the nation's representatives during the Apulia G7 Summit which will further cost physical, human, and financial capital. While the bedrock for these occurrences were laid in previous years, apart from the seemingly pioneering plans and initiatives taken up by Italy during the G7 Summit forming a beacon of light, occurrences with regards to the Italy-Albania deal, and Meloni's "mother of all bills", seem to have been more regressive and harmful, leaving the country at a crucial crossroads with a severe need for reflection and transparency.

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## Introduction

2024 has been transformative for the Republic of Latvia, marked by economic growth, political changes and significant social progress. From record-breaking tourism growth and resignation of a high-power member of the parliament to the adoption of the Partnership Law, Latvia experienced key milestones that shaped the country's domestic and international standing. This article explores the most notable events that defined the country's trajectory in 2024.

## Tourism Growth

In 2024, Latvia experienced a notable surge in tourism, ranking as the third EU country with the largest increase in overnight stays at tourist accommodations: a 7% rise compared to 2023. From January to August 2024, Latvia welcomed 1.9 million visitors, a 10.5% increase from the same period in 2023. The peak season, June to August, saw 1.1 million visitors, with both residents and non-residents stays increasing by 7.4% and 14.6% respectively.

Tourism growth is closely linked to the aviation sector, particularly the Latvian airline airBaltic, which had a record-

breaking year in 2024. The airline carried 8.3 million passengers and operated 73,300 flights, making its highest-ever annual performance. Key factors of this success include the addition of 16 new destinations from Riga, Tallinn, and Vilnius, adding new routes to cities in Poland, Romania, Norway, Spain and other destinations. Additionally, flight frequency increased on 17 existing routes, catering to growing demand and improving connectivity for both leisure and business travelers.

AirBaltic also expanded its transatlantic reach, enhancing travel options between Latvia and North America. In November 2024, the airline entered a codeshare agreement with Air Canada. Ten Air Canada codes were added to airBaltic-operated routes and two airBaltic codes were added to Air Canada operated flights. This allows passengers to book seamless travel between Canada and Latvia via key European hubs such as Copenhagen, Amsterdam and Stockholm, eliminating the need for baggage rechecks on connecting flights and simplifying the booking process.

Meanwhile, air travel is not the only source of travel to Latvia, it plays a significant role in Latvia's tourism and economy. The Latvian aviation sector generates

an economic output of USD 452.3 million, which accounts for 1.0% of the country's GDP. When considering the broader impact – including supply chain activities, employee spending, and aviation-facilitated tourism – the total contribution rises to USD 1.9 billion, supporting 36 600 jobs and representing 4.4% of Latvia's GDP. AirBaltic's expanded network in 2024 has significantly boosted Latvia's accessibility and attractiveness as a travel destination, making it more connected, convenient and affordable for international visitors. The aviation-driven tourism boom underscores Latvia's growing appeal in the European travel market.

## Latvian Foreign Minister Resigns

On April 10, 2024, Latvian Foreign Minister Krišjānis Kariņš announced his resignation following a criminal probe into his expensive private flights during his tenure as Prime Minister between 2019 and 2023. Latvia's corruption bureau (KNAB) launched an investigation on March 22, 2024. According to the statement from Latvia's General Prosecutor's Office, the Prosecutor General has presented a case for criminal investigation to KNAB

after a preliminary inquiry by the prosecutor found that for special charter trips, organized between 2021 and 2023, larger amounts were spent than were foreseen in the contracts with travel agencies for organization of charter travel.

Kariņš, allegedly spent €600,000 from the state budget on charter flights, with EU contributing another €557,000 - the highest sum allocated to any EU leader for travel. The scandal gained traction in November 2023, when the opposition United List (AS) party demanded an explanation of the Prime Minister's travel expenditure when a local news site reported on Kariņš's expenditure of Latvian state funds on charter flights. Kariņš defended the expenditures, stating they were necessary to save time for state business when international conferences overran their schedules. He also emphasized that travel arrangements were handled by the State Chancellery, which, according to the Prosecutor General's Office, could bear primary responsibility for any misuse of funds.

Despite the controversy, Kariņš did not address the scandal in his resignation statement. His departure effectively ended his bid to become NATO Secretary General, leaving EU trade chief Valdis Dombrovskis, a fellow

New Unity party member, as the frontrunner for the position. While Kariņš remained a candidate for NATO leadership, his resignation significantly weakened his chances, and as of 2025, he did not secure the position.

Following his resignation, Baiba Braže was appointed Foreign Minister of Latvia. Braže, a former Latvia's ambassador to the Netherlands and the UK, also served as NATO's Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy. On June 4th Braže joined the New Unity party, having not previously been in a political party during her entire diplomatic career for over 30 years.

## Partnership Law Enters into Force

On July 1, 2024, Latvia's Partnership Law officially came into force, introducing a new legal institution - partnership. Enabling all couples, including same-sex couples, to register their relationship under it. The first couple to take advantage of this long-awaited change, Maksims Ringo and Janis Locs, formalized their partnership just after midnight, as soon as the partnership became available in Latvia.

The journey toward legal recognition of same-sex

partnerships in Latvia has been complex and contentious. The initiative to validate same-sex partnerships was initially proposed in 2020 by the *Dzīvesbiedri* (Spouses) movement and the citizen initiative platform, *ManaBalss.lv*. However, the proposal was met with resistance. A parliamentary commission recommended its rejection, citing contradiction with the article of the Latvian constitution (*Satversme*), which mandates the state to protect and support the union between a man and a woman. In October of 2023, the New Unity party proposed a newly-drafted legislative package recognizing same-sex unions. The proposal gained momentum after 46 same-sex couples successfully challenged the law in court, seeking recognition as family units. In November 2023, the bill passed both its first and second readings in the Latvian Parliament (*Saeime*). However, 34 MPs opposed the measure and attempted to delay its enactment, urging President Edgars Rinkēvičs to postpone signing the bill until January 2024. The opponents were seeking to collect 154,241 signatures in order to proceed with a referendum on the civil union law. The referendum initiative ultimately failed, and Rinkēvičs signed the law, which officially took effect on July 1, 2024.

The change in the law states that a partnership can be entered into by two adults who appear in person before a notary and certify they have a close relationship, a common household, and the intention to care for it and to care and support each other. While a partnership is not equivalent to marriage, it grants couples certain legal rights such as a right to know and decide on the medical treatment of the partner, regulation of conflict of interest, tax relief and social assistance. However, the law does not extend to adoption and inheritance rights, distinguishing it from full marriage equality.

Latvia's Minister of Justice, Inese Lībiņa-Egnere, acknowledged that "the road was not smooth", a sentiment echoed in public opinion. A 2023 poll conducted by Globsec found that only 40% of Latvians support legal recognition of the same-sex relationships, highlighting the continued societal divide over LGBTQ+ rights. Nevertheless, the introduction of the Partnership Law marks a significant milestone in Latvia's social and political landscape. It signals Latvia's commitment to modern European values and its willingness to foster a more inclusive society. As Kaspars Zālītis, head of the "*Dzīvesbiedri*", put it, the introduction of

Partnership law is an important signal that all families in Latvia are protected, valued, and recognized.

## EU Elections

On June 8, 2024, Latvian citizens participated in the European Parliament elections. This year's election saw a voter turnout of 33.82%, with 521,226 voters casting their ballots, which is a slight increase in voter turnout compared to the 33.5% in 2019. New Unity remained the leading party with 25.09% of the vote, retaining two seats, followed by the National Alliance with 22.07% and also two seats. Emerging parties made significant progress: For Latvia's Development captured 9.36% of the vote, earning one seat; the United List received 8.18%, securing one seat; and the Progressives obtained 7.45%, also gaining one seat. The Social Democratic Party "Harmony" saw a decline, achieving 7.13% of the vote and losing one seat, now holding only one seat. The Latvia First party, a newcomer, secured 6.16%, gaining one seat in the European Parliament. The election results reflect strong voter support for national security and defence policies with the European framework. The success of the New Unity and the

National Alliance, both securing two mandates, highlights the electorate's preference for robust defense strategies and deeper EU integration. Additionally, the increased presence of new and smaller parties highlights a diversification in Latvia's political representation, with both established and emerging forces sharing the country's nine allocated seats in the European Parliament.

## Year in Review

Looking into 2024, Latvia continues to strike a balance between tradition and modernization across its political, economic, and social spheres. The country's commitment to progress and European values is evident in its advancement in LGBTQ+ rights through the Partnership Law and its efforts to ensure greater financial accountability in government. Additionally, airBaltic's expanded network has strengthened Latvia's global connectivity, reinforcing its role as a key player in European and international affairs. As Latvia deepens its commitment to democracy, equity and economic growth, it remains steadfast in preserving its national identity while embracing a more inclusive and promising future.

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## Introduction

In 2024, the international context has largely focused on what is happening to the east of Europe, as tensions between Russia and Ukraine continue to be an influential topic well into its second year in war. To the south of Ukraine, however, lies the country of Moldova, the former Soviet country with ties to Russia through several institutions and regions that they cannot shake off. However, this year for Moldova has demonstrated a very strong pro-Western shift of their politics, as President Maia Sandu demonstrates pro-Western politics.

Furthermore, Moldova has drawn international attention as politics get more complicated with its disputed territory of Transnistria, which experiences strong ties to Russia. As a de facto state, the region calls attention as its relations to its neighbour to the east encroach more and more on Western Europe, not only through its take over of land, but also through its monopoly on natural resources, and its influences on inner state politics.

The year 2024 has been an interesting time for Moldova. Faced with mounting pressure from their Russian neighbours to their east amidst their presidential

elections, Moldovans have had a rollercoaster of a year, with highs and lows throughout.

### Russian Interference in National Moldovan Election

Moldova is a country with much political discourse surrounding its parties. As a post-Soviet country, socialist influences manage to pull the countries' interests in one way, while Western-aligned parties pull the country the other. In this new year, and in the face of Russian aggression, Moldovan elections were unable to be free from interference from Russian affairs of state.

With Alexandr Stoianoglo running for President as the socialist candidate, many have acknowledged his pro-Russian stance as they headed to the polls. Once in the polls, however, election monitors accused Russia of cyberattacks, as well as vote-buying for Stoianoglo, counting as massive interference in the election process of what deems itself a democratic country. More counts of foreign interference include planned espionage at diaspora polling stations, as well as bomb threats abroad. Moldova's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has said that polling stations in Germany and

the United Kingdom were victims of false bomb threats.

One constant in Moldova's internal state of affairs is the involvement of Israeli-Moldovan Ilan Shor, a pro-Russian fugitive to Moldova who, in 2019, fled to Israel while on house arrest pending an appeal after, as president to the Banca de Economii, stole over \$1B dollars alongside two other banks. This year, Shor has been accused by the Security and Intelligence Service of Moldova of funneling one billion Moldovan lei into the country since mid-2022 in order to pay for swaying peoples' votes in favor of the pro-Russian socialist party. In October of 2024, Moldovan police accused Shor of funneling more than \$15 million, in Russian funds, into more than a hundred and thirty thousand Moldovan citizens. This is not a first for Ilan Shor, who is suspected of owning Russian citizenship and has interfered in prior Moldovan elections.

Stoianoglo is currently under investigation by Moldovan authorities for claims of corruption, where he is accused of running a campaign funded by Shor, which, ultimately, is also funded by the Kremlin. Given the small margin by which opposition and current president Maia Sandu claimed victory over Stoianoglo, which was

a much smaller margin than the polls had predicted, it is assumed that Russia was successful in illegally swaying undecided voters.

### The 2024 Moldovan Elections

Despite mass amounts of foreign interference in this years' presidential elections, the pro-Western party of the PAS, Party of Action and Solidarity. Sandu, who has been president of Moldova since 24th December 2020, managed to snag the presidency for the second time consecutively by attaining 55.33% of the votes against 44.67% of votes from Stoianoglo during the second round of presidential elections following a failed first round. Reportedly 54% of the population (~1,690,911 voters) turned out to vote, a percentage that is consistent with prior presidential voter turnouts for the country. After the presidential election of 2005, Moldovan presidential elections have stalled out at around 51-59%, demonstrating an average turnout this year.

During the first round of presidential elections, none of the 11 candidates in the election managed to secure 50% of the votes, or an outright majority, leading to a second round. During

the first round held on October 20th, Sandu only secured 42% of votes. Stoianoglo only won 26%. Ultimately, Sandu's pro-EU stance and Western views won against her opposition, whom she refers to as "Moscow's man." Sandu, alongside her party, which she created herself, has pushed for Moldova's "irreversibility" of the "European course" in the constitution. She has stressed her fear that Moldova will become the next target of the Kremlin after its 2022 attack on Ukraine, and Western media has said that Sandu's narrow victory demonstrates Russian influence over the country.

On the same day of the first presidential election, Sandu held an election for a referendum on the 20th of October, whose goal was to vote on whether the country should amend the Constitution of Moldova to include Moldovan citizens' wishes for EU citizenship. This would make it harder for future Moldovan governments to move away from its current pro-European pathway, effectively reversing Moldova's socialist party's attempts to make Moldova an official political Russian ally. The referendum was voted into effect on a knife edge win, with only 50.31% of votes that agreed to this change.

Moscow claimed this narrow win in the referendum "raises questions," while also

rejecting Sandu's accusations of Russian interference in the elections.

### Transnistria Cuts Gas as Ukraine Transit Deal Runs Out

Moldova is caught directly in the middle of the war against Ukraine. Throughout the years, the country has suffered mounting Russian pressure in the region as the military advances and actively moves around the region. Moldova's disputed territory, Transnistria, is known as a breakaway region that seeks official recognition of independence from Moldova. Given this, Russia sees the de facto state as somewhere to invest support, although they have not recognized Transnistria officially. This region of Moldova is heavily pro-Russian.

Transnistria signed a deal with Russia where Russian gas was allowed to transit through the region. Russia sold gasoline to Europe through Ukraine, which was only delivered to Ukraine for them to distribute by means of Transnistria. Ukraine this year decided to not transit Russian gas anymore, meaning that Moldova was left without gas. The Ukraine transit deal ran out on December 30th of 2024.

Russia supplied Moldova

with 2 billion cubic meters of gas that is piped to Ukraine through this region. Transnistria also sells power to government-controlled parts of Moldova. Therefore, this region was left without gas, as there is a gas cutoff. At this time, president Sandu has said that there is enough gas to heat citizens, but has warned Transnistrian residents that they must leave the area and travel to main Moldova to acquire basic necessities.

Transnistria has, at this time, cut off their gas supplies to state institutions in Chișinău. Reports say that 12 state institutions were cut off on towns that are on the border with government-controlled areas of Moldova, such as Dubăsari and Bender. Former Energy Minister Victor Parlicov told Radio Moldova: "The Kremlin's real goal here is to destabilize Moldova and plunge it into chaos."

### Year in Review

2024 has been a year of change for Moldovans, as the Europeanization of their country has been set as the official trajectory, as voted on in the Constitution of Moldova. Moldova has been susceptible to the whims of Russia, as their neighbours to the east attempt to meddle with Chișinău's presidential elections,

both domestically and abroad, as well as involve themselves with the internal governance of the state, and affect relations between the capital and its breakaway regions through its gas cutoff.

With Putin's continued advancement of the war, media sources have had much to say regarding its involvement in Moldovan politics. Moldovan news pieces have demonstrated that the country faces a large problem with its "friends" to the east, and the country's own president has stressed her own concerns over Moldova becoming Moscow's pawn as it falls into its hands.

Beyond that, this year has had some positive news for pro-European Moldovans. Moldovans have demonstrated their desire to become a Western-aligned country, as their re-election of pro-Western Maia Sandu indicates, and their choice to vote yes on the referendum. It cannot be said that the citizens of Moldova are not fighting for what they want, and not going down trying, as the referendum on including citizens' wishes for EU citizenship was realized with a knife's edge vote. The future is bright for Moldova, as Maia Sandu says that this step was the "...first battle in a difficult fight" for a better future.

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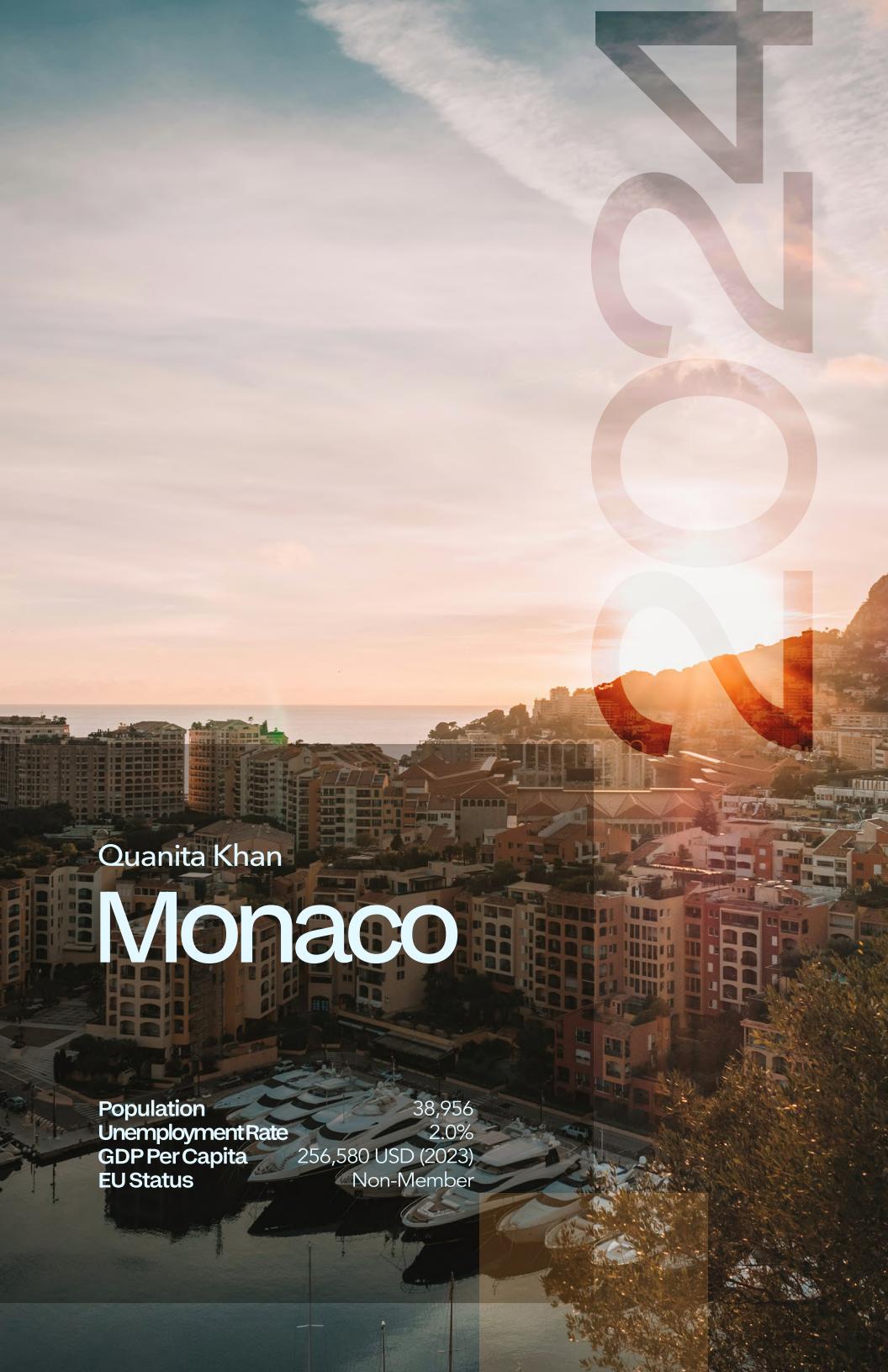
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## Introduction

In 2024 the Principality of Monaco created and invested in a new residential area to accommodate the growing demand of houses, conceded to the Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile on multiple fronts to retain their track position on the Formula One race calendar, and strengthened legal and policy frameworks to tackle money-laundering and financial terrorism. Thus 2024, was a year of restructuring Monaco's construction, development, entertainment, legal, and policy frameworks to accommodate the growing needs of its citizens, the sporting industry, and the international financial community.

## Housing Crisis: Tax-free Haven doesn't Guarantee Housing Security

In 2022, the Principality of Monaco had a reported land area of 2.1 km<sup>2</sup>, thus there is a dire need to expand Monaco's land to accommodate the growing demand for housing. Sandwiched between Italy and France, Monaco has no choice but to expand its coastline to create more houses. The Mareterra project, completed

in December 2024, was born out of this necessity. Renzo Piano Building Workshop (RPBW), Valode et Pistre Architects, and Michel Desvigne, a renowned landscape architect, collaborated to create the Mareterra Project.

The Mareterra Project cost \$2 billion to create 110 apartments, four townhouses, and ten villas. The district has a "pedestrian promenade" and an underwater area to observe marine life within the caissons. The project has emphasized environmental conservation. The architects relocated and monitored Posidonia seagrass and red coral through in-depth conversations with marine biologists to minimize "ecological disruption." Their sustainability efforts earned the Mareterra project the following certifications: BREEAM "Excellent" HQE Aménagement, Biodiversity, Espace Vert Écologique, and European Clean Ports.

The Mareterra Project began its construction in 2018 and it has a curved design to mimic the flow of the water, consisting of 18 underwater caissons reinforced with a metal barrier which allows the saltwater to be pumped out. The remaining space between the caissons and barrier was filled with limestone and sand. As a "floating eco-district", the project

includes: caissons with grooves to allow algae to colonize it, 2.47 acres of pine forests, 9000m<sup>2</sup> of solar panels that supplies 40% of the energy, a seawater "thalassothermal loop" offers cooling and heating, and rainwater recycled for irrigation and green roofs.

The Principality of Monaco accommodated increasing housing demands by extending their coastline. The Mareterra Project is the third coastline-expanding housing project, The Larvotto and Fortvieille have been relatively successful without a focus on sustainability.

## The Monaco Formula One Grand Prix

The 2024 Formula One (F1) season celebrated, scrutinized, and pressured the Monaco Grand Prix (GP) organizers. After a drought of race wins since the Austrian Grand Prix in 2022, Charles Leclerc – a Monaco native – won the Monaco GP by securing the provisional pole position. While the Monegasque royal family and citizens celebrated Leclerc's win, many questioned the "monotonous" race track labelling it as "pedestrian" and "defeatist." The Monaco GP is facing increased scrutiny and pressures because its race contract with the Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA) ends at the end of the 2025 F1 season.

The Monaco GP has been part of F1 since 1929 and drivers, like Lewis Hamilton – won the Monaco GP three times – and Fernando Alonso – won the Monaco GP two times – agree that F1 cannot be "without Monaco" but it needs to implement changes. Team Principals and engineers, F1 drivers, and commentators have highlighted the shortcomings of the race track. Since there is no space to overtake cars because of the width and weight of cars, it makes pitting the cars for new tires difficult – especially since all the teams are trying to win or get points – so the teams need to implement no-stop strategies which requires the drivers to maintain their tyres leading to a slow, "crawling" race. Additionally, crowds are severely limited due to a lack of space. Concerns with the Monaco GP have led to the Automobile Club of Monaco to make major concessions to the FIA to extend their race hosting contract by 2031. His Royal Highness Albert II of Monaco and Michel Boeri, President of the Automobile Club of Monaco (ACM), were instrumental in negotiating the extension of the Monaco GP to 2031. The relation between the FIA and the ACM had been relatively

tense due to restricted television broadcasting rights and on-track advertising. Coupled with immense dissatisfaction from the public, the F1 drivers and Team Principals, the ACM had to concede to: (i) a change as the GP will be held on the first full weekend of June starting 2026 instead of its original time – the last full weekend in May and (ii) an increase in the “hosting fee” as the circuit previously paid US \$20 million, the lowest of all F1 race tracks. The new partnership has an environmental focus from 2026 onwards as the GP date changes allows the Miami and Canadian GPs to be held back-to-back. The Monaco GP has successfully retained its racing legacy.

### Money Laundering: Illicit Financial Flows

Monaco has experienced an overhaul of its legal and policy frameworks concerned with financial transparency and money laundering. In January 2023, MONEYVAL – Committee of Experts on the Evaluation of Anti-Money Laundering Measures and the Financing of Terrorism – which is part of the Council of Europe, released a report which emphasized Monaco’s weaknesses against “money laundering” and “terrorist funding.” Additionally, during

the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) Plenary on June 26-28, the FATF added Monaco to the ‘grey list’ because of its loose financial monitoring laws which means Monaco will be monitored until January 2026 for its compliance.

The Monegasque authorities have implemented the following: (i) a high-level steering committee which create a national strategy and Action Plan for the 5th GRECO Evaluation Cycle (2025-2028), (ii) hired a new secretary of State for Justice, Samuel Vueltas-Simon, to create a new financial department within the Public Prosecutor’s Office, and (ii) voted for Bill 1084 – specifically, ‘Part IV of the Adoption of Legislative Provisions on Fight Against Money Laundering and Financial Terrorism.’ Monaco has adopted nine new laws in its anti-money laundering legal framework which includes the “capability to detect and investigate terrorist financing” and “financial sanctions and risk-based suspension of non-profit organizations.”

On 10 December 2024, MONEYVAL released a 60-page report titled “Anti-money Laundering and Counter-terrorist Financing Measures Monaco” which rated Monaco as having improved compliance with recommendations 6, 7 and 12, largely compliant with

recommendations 4, 8, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 31, 34, 35 and 37 but partially compliant with recommendation 15. MONEYVAL’s report only focuses on legislative, regulatory, and institutional changes but does not evaluate the effectiveness of their implementation.

Monaco will report back to MONEYVAL in three years to demonstrate the effectiveness of their new Anti-Money Laundering and Counter-terrorist Financing measures. The FATF will evaluate Monaco on its financial monitoring systems and compliance with FATF recommendations in May 2025 and September 2026.

### Year in Review

Monaco has had to overhaul its legal and administrative policies to accommodate MONEYVAL and the Financial Action Task Force to be in compliance with the international standards of anti-money laundering financial terrorism. The country has had to concede major broadcasting rights and increased hosting fees to retain its racing legacy in Formula One. Lastly, Monaco had to artificially increase its coastline to meet the demands of a growing population. 2024 has been a year of concessions and compromises for the Principality of Monaco.

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Nicole Sniatowski

# Poland

Population  
Unemployment Rate  
GDP Per Capita  
EU Status

38,539,201  
2.7%  
22,113 USD (2023)  
EU Member

## POLAND

Nicole Sniatowski

### Introduction

Poland, an influential and strong member of the European Union, has undergone significant political shifts in the past couple of years, from the Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość [PiS]) re-election in 2019 to Donald Tusk's new position as Poland's Premiere in 2023. With a population of approximately 38 million, Poland's 2023 GDP of \$22,056.67 (per capita), illustrates an evolving economy and an increase in power on the European stage. However, due to the nation's history of right-wing governance and disputes regarding current migration policies, Poland faces challenges in navigating European integration while maintaining its protection of national sovereignty. These challenges, however, will assist in better understanding Poland's internal struggles but also rising prominence within the EU.

### EU Election Results

On May 1st, 2004, Poland became a member of the European Union under the Accession Treaty signed on April 16th, 2003 in Athens. In the EU there are officially 53 MEPs, (members of European Parliament), who are elected for a five-year term by direct

elections. Currently, Piotr Serafin is the European Commissioner, Poland's official representation, overseeing public, budget, and anti-fraud administration. On the European Economic and Social Committee, Poland also possesses 21 representatives. In 2024, Poland possessed a 40.65% in voter turnout for the EU final elections. Most notably, as of 2023, Donald Tusk, leader of the Civic Coalition, is the Premiere of Poland, possessing a pro-EU agenda, in contrast to his opposition party, and past majority government, the Law and Justice party (PiS).

### Judicial Reforms

Within the European Union, Poland's judiciary legitimacy has been a disputed issue, specifically under the Law and Justice (PiS) government. From 2015 to 2019, PiS held office with presidential candidate Andrzej Duda winning both the 2015 and 2020 re-election. However, in October and December 2023, PiS lost their majority in the parliamentary elections and office. Majority seats were instead won by the forming of three opposition blocs, the Third Way and The Left, with the largest being led by Donald Tusk, the Civic Coalition. Currently, Donald Tusk is the Premiere of Poland, also

holding this position from 2007 to 2014, and from 2014 to 2019 he was the President of the EU European Council.

The Law and Justice Party is a radical right-wing party promoting conservative social issues, such as pro-life, anti-LGBT+ rhetoric, and traditional family values. From 2015 to 2019, tensions worsened between the party and EU, as legal proceedings were enacted by the EU against Poland over concerns regarding the independence of the "rule of law" and judiciary. The changes made by PiS to the judiciary were ruled as unconstitutional and in violation of EU law by the European Court of Human Rights and the Court of Justice. In response, PiS argued that these changes would improve the efficiency and speed of court proceedings, despite cases being increasingly delayed during this period. In practice, PiS's main objective was to replace judges with ones loyal to the party, executing their legislations. In 2017, an amendment was passed which gave the Sejm, the lower house of the Polish government, majority control over judicial nominations of the 15 judges making up the National Council of the Judiciary (NCJ). This reform took majority influence away from independent judges themselves.

Since then, approximately 2,400 justices have been appointed or advanced in their nomination to the president. Due to the NCJ's harsh political shift, the Supreme Court and European courts referred to these judiciaries as "neo-judges," in regards to their lack of objectivity and independence. In October 2021, during PiS's time in power, Poland was fined €1 million a day as they refused to suspend their disciplinary chamber, an order given by the European Court of Justice. In April 2023, the fine was halved to €500,000, but was later stopped in June 2023 after the Court of Justice ruled otherwise in the disciplinary chamber. Due to PiS's tumultuous history with the EU, Poland was almost forced to leave in 2019.

On February 29th, 2024, the green light granted by the European Commission, unblocked an estimated €137 billion for Poland. Due to the new Polish government led by Prime Minister Donald Tusk, the Commission believed Poland's rule of law was on its way to restoration. However, Poland was ordered to follow two set of rules in order to receive their payments: "(1) to strengthen important aspects of the independence of the Polish judiciary through reforming the disciplinary regime for judges; (2) to use Arachne, the

EU's IT tool for preventing fraud and irregularities." Moreover, from the 2021-2027 Cohesion Policy, Maritime and Fisheries, and Home affairs funding programmes, the Commission also endorsed an estimated €76.5 billion, illustrating that the Commission believes Poland's reforms have satisfied the conditions present within the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. Additionally, on April 12th, 2024, the lower house of the Polish parliament, the Sejm, approved a law which sought to reform the National Council of the Judiciary, otherwise known as the KRS. More importantly, parliament will no longer be able to elect members of the Council, instead they will be appointed by judges, due to the "neo-judges" controversy of 2018. However, the leader of PiS, President Andrzej Duda, stated he will not support the law, vetoing it. Furthermore, in November 2024, the "10 pillars" for judicial reforms were released by Adam Bodnar, the Polish Minister of Justice. These reforms were created to make the Polish courts more effective and efficient, ultimately doing so without legislative amendments. Despite the expected opposition from President Duda, the reforms are still set to make progress regardless. Lastly, former Justice Minister Zbigniew Ziobro who

was previously under the PiS government, will be met with tough treatment from the Polish parliamentary committee. During his time in government, Ziobro was allegedly caught spying on oppositional members by purchasing and using Pegasus surveillance, and due to his refusal to testify,

## Immigration Policy

Despite Poland's improving relationship with the European Union under Donald Tusk's pro-EU agenda, in early March 2025, the nation declared they will not be implementing the EU's Migration and Asylum Pact, refusing to comply with the new legislation. The new Pact on Migration and Asylum, which for all 27 member states is legally binding, aims to divide responsibility over uncontrolled migration of asylum seekers, under the policy's new mechanism, "mandatory solidarity." In order to meet the Pact's requirements, government's possess three options. Firstly, they can relocate asylum seekers, accepting migrants from countries possessing an increase in migration pressure (preferably 30,000 asylum seekers per year). Secondly, they can provide operational support in which nations can issue equipment,

personnel, or other assets to assist in controlling migration, specifically in border control. Lastly, nations are also given the option to financially contribute, paying into a collective EU fund if that nation refuses to take in any migrants. The required contribution annually would be €600,000 million. However, in firm opposition of the new pact, Premiere Donald Tusk stated "Poland will not implement the Migration Pact in a way that would introduce additional quotas of immigrants in Poland." Tusk has also raised concerns over Poland's internal struggle with illegal migration, specifically with illegal migrants and spies coming in from Russia and Belarus.

Furthermore, Poland has continued to independently manage their migration policies, and continues to call for stronger border controls. Tusk has claimed that while Poland is able to cooperate with other nations in preventing illegal immigration in Europe, they will not be "[taking] on any additional burdens. [Poland has] already taken on more than anyone could have imagined just a few years ago," in reference to the assistance Poland has provided Ukraine during the ongoing Ukraine-Russia war. During the war, Poland has taken in over 1.5 million Ukrainian refugees. These refugees

mainly consist of women, children, and senior citizens, the majority of whom cannot work but place a big burden on the medical, social, and school systems. Poland also lacks a migration and integration policy at a national level, causing individual regions and cities to take on the responsibilities. However, Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission, is aware of this issue and has announced that the European Commission would take into consideration the amount of Ukrainian refugees taken and supported in Poland. She stated that "Poland has shown, and is showing, extraordinary solidarity with Ukraine and hosting the largest number of Ukrainian refugees [...] something which absolutely has to be taken into account." Therefore, it remains crucial to examine Poland's role, assistance, and support of the Ukraine and Russia war, and the vast responsibilities the nation has taken on. Despite these efforts, Poland remains at the centre of controversy in their refusal to comply with the Migration and Asylum Pact. Their opposition has been heavily criticized by the European Court of Human Rights, claiming Poland violates the rights of asylum seekers and international law, stating it to be "flagrantly unlawful." However, the Polish population believes otherwise.

According to Polish Business Insider, approximately three fourths of Poles are opposed to migrants seeking asylum in Poland. An analysis regarding allowing migrants in Poland concluded that 78% of adult males were opposed to migration in comparison to 73% of the female adult population. Residents in rural areas polled the highest percentage against the acceptance of migrants, with 82%, in comparison to 61% polled in major cities. Those most in support of the policy ranged from 60 and over, recording a minor 22%. Nevertheless, the acceptance of migrants was not popular amongst any demographic group, holding no majority.

Furthermore, in relation to current political shifts, on February 17th, 2025, Donald Tusk addressed the European Union warning nations to allocate more funding towards defense spending and refrain from "playing games with Trump." As European countries quickly attempt to form Ukrainian security guarantees, Tusk adamantly states to not break ties with the United States and work with re-elected President, Donald Trump. During his speech, Tusk claims that unfortunately Poland is an exception to the rule, as they are one of NATO's top military spenders, at 4.7% of

GDP. Furthermore, he claims that "this absolutely needs to change," again, arguing for his fellow EU countries to step up and follow in Poland's lead.

## Year in Review

To conclude, while Poland is on the path of reaffirming its commitment to the European Union under the leadership of Donald Tusk, previous and current tensions continue to impact Poland's integration efforts, its role, and overall approach to current EU policies. In understanding judicial reforms, migration, and assistance provided during the Ukraine and Russia war, one can better understand Poland's evolving political landscape within the Union and on the European stage. As Poland advances, its future will depend on its actions regarding European cooperation and balancing of national interests while addressing possible tensions.

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Emyleigh Simoes

# Portugal

**Population**  
10,207,177  
**Unemployment Rate**  
6.5% (2022)  
**GDP Per Capita**  
27,331 USD (2023)  
**EU Status**  
EU Member

## PORTUGAL

Emyleigh Simoes

### Introduction

In 2024, Portugal faced significant political and social challenges, including natural disasters and political scandals, while maintaining overall stability. This report will discuss the three central events that shaped Portuguese politics and society this year: the snap elections held in March, the updated laws on migration and asylum in June, and the wildfires that swept the nation in September. The snap general election, called in November 2023 when then President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa dissolved the Assembly of the Republic, revealed a growing divide between left and right in Portugal, with no party winning an outright majority. The updated laws on migration and asylum, which included measures to expand reception capacity and streamline migration and asylum claims, stands in stark contrast to many policies proposed by parties across Europe, which seek to limit immigration. Finally, between 15 and 20 September 2024 more than 1000 wildfires swept northern and central Portugal, resulting in immense devastation and loss for the population. Though these represent only a snapshot of Portugal in 2024, a deep dive into these issues reveals broader trends

within Portuguese society and politics.

### Snap Legislative Elections

On 9 November 2023, Portuguese President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa dissolved the Assembly of the Republic (Parliament), announcing general elections in March 2024, two years ahead of schedule. The decision came shortly after Prime Minister António Costa resigned on 7 November amid a corruption investigation, ending his eight-year tenure. Although de Sousa could have appointed a new Prime Minister, he instead called the elections, hoping that the next PM could be legitimized by parliament. This marked Portugal's third legislative election in the last five years.

The elections, held on 10 March 2024, saw the highest voter turnout since 1995, with an abstention rate of 33.8%. Notably, 19.4% of eligible voters living abroad participated, an increase of nearly five percentage points from the 2022 legislative elections. The results delivered a narrow victory for the center-right Democratic Alliance (AD), which won 28.6% of the vote and secured 80 parliamentary seats. This was just 0.85% ahead of the Socialist Party

(PS), the narrowest margin in the history of Portuguese democracy. The PS, now relegated to the opposition, experienced a sharp decline in seats, with its leader Pedro Nuno Santos declaring that the party would neither support AD's budget nor cooperate with them in parliament. However, AD only gained 3 seats to add to their 77 seats won in 22. A key development in this election was actually the growth in support for the populist radical right party Chega, which gained 38 seats. Capitalizing on growing public discontent over immigration, the party made significant gains, securing 18% of the vote.

Under the Portuguese constitution, the President is responsible for appointing the Prime Minister based on election results and consultations with parliamentary parties, shaping the next phase of Portugal's political landscape. Usually, the person appointed is the leader of largest party in parliament and this year was no exception. De Sousa appointed AD leader Louís Montenegro as prime minister after hearing from all the parties represented in parliament. AD presented its government on March 28 and took office on 2 April.

## Updates to Migration and Asylum Laws

In May 2024, the Portuguese Council of Ministers approved a new Action Plan for Migration to address issues stemming from entry regulations and border control while seeking to increase support for the integration of immigrants. The plan recognizes Portugal's demographic and economic need for increased immigration. Prime Minister Montenegro emphasized that Portugal would remain open to immigration while maintaining control over the process. He outlined the government's vision based on four pillars: regulated migration, proactive attraction of foreign talent, a welcoming and humane approach, and improved state efficiency.

The new laws ended the possibility of regularizing status through a tourist visa, requiring a work contract beforehand. Measures include attracting skilled workers, setting up emergency housing, increasing support for asylum seekers, and expanding Portuguese language education and healthcare access. A new police unit will oversee border control, while AIMA will focus on documentation and integration. Notably, the plan includes the

transformation of the CPLP visa into a community visa, which would allow movement within the Schengen zone. This reform aims to facilitate mobility while ensuring compliance with European regulations.

To address administrative challenges, Portugal opened over 20 service points in September 2024 to help process 400,000 pending residence permit applications, which will remain operational until June 2025. Additionally, in December 2024, two support centers were launched to assist immigrants with documentation, employment, healthcare, education, and language learning. Public sentiment toward immigration is mixed. While many Portuguese acknowledge its economic necessity, concerns about integration, crime, and national identity persist. Far-right parties like Chega have leveraged these concerns, while business associations argue that stricter immigration laws hinder recruitment.

## Wildfires

Between 15 and 20 September, more than 1000 wildfires were reported in Northern and Central Portugal, making 2024 one of the worst years for forest

fires in the last decade. Before this outbreak, Portugal had seen one of the lowest numbers of forest fires in recent history, leading to optimism that recently implemented prevention campaigns had been successful.

The September wildfires claimed nine lives, including four firefighters, and left 177 people injured, 17 of them seriously. Unable to manage the crisis alone, Portugal activated the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, receiving aircrafts from Spain, Italy, France, Morocco and Greece, while over 300 Spanish firefighters were deployed to assist. The most affected areas, Aveiro, Tâmega e Sousa, Viseu Dão Lafões and the Porto Metropolitan Area, were placed under a state of emergency, the highest level of intervention under Portugal's Civil Protection Framework Law. In total, the fires burned over 121,000 hectares of land in just five days, accounting for 92% of all burned land in Portugal in 2024.

Deputy Minister for Territorial Cohesion Manuel Castro Almeida announced public support covering up to 85% of reconstruction costs for homes lost in the fires, with the potential redirection of European funds to aid affected businesses. The scattered nature of the outbreaks

and nighttime temperatures, which were not conducive to spontaneous combustion, reinforced suspicions of deliberate ignition. Investigations established criminal intent as a major factor, with arson confirmed responsible for 30% of the fires.

Despite initial hopes for a successful fire prevention year, 2024 ultimately saw devastating losses. By September 20, all active fires had been extinguished, but the destruction underscored the urgent need for stronger wildfire prevention and response strategies in the region.

## European Parliament Elections in Portugal

European Parliament elections were held in Portugal on 9 June 2024. The date of the elections was contentious, as it's close proximity to Portugal Day (June 10th), a national holiday, and numerous local holidays risked low turnout. The Portuguese Government tried to change the date, but this was rejected. Despite this, voter turnout increased by 6.7% in Portugal compared to 2019, putting them fifth in terms of countries whose participation increased the most. The 2024 elections recorded a record participation rate of 37.52% in

Portugal. This followed a general trend across Europe which saw the lowest abstention rate in the last 20 years. The turnout in the Faro district increased the most, by almost 60% compared to 2019. However, the number of registered voters only increased by 1.64% in the same period. In the Porto district, voter turnout increased by 12.6% but the number of registered voters stayed the same. Similarly in the Azores, there was a 29.9% increase in turnout, but the number of registered voters stayed the same. The rising cost of living was the key reason that led the majority of Portuguese voters (59%) to vote in the European elections. The mobile vote also played a role, allowing voters to go to the polls at any voting station.

Portugal elects 21 members to the European Parliament, with representation spread across multiple coalitions. The European elections provided an early test to see whether Portugal's new minority government under AD maintained support. The Socialist Party (PS) secured the largest share, winning 8 seats as part of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D). The Social Democratic Party (PPD/PSD) and the People's Party (CDS-PP) together obtained 7 seats under the European People's Party Group (EPP). The far-right party

Chega (CH) won 2 seats for the first time within the newly formed Patriots for Europe (PfE) group. The Liberal Initiative (IL) also gained 2 seats, aligning with Renew Europe (RE). The Left Bloc (BE) and the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) each won a seat, bringing their total to 2 within the European United Left-Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL). Notably, the majority of Portugal's elected MEPs are serving their first term in the European Parliament.

In the previous European Parliament elections, the Socialist Party (PS) secured nine seats as part of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), making it the dominant Portuguese party in the EU legislature. The European People's Party Group (EPP), represented by the Social Democratic Party (PPD/PSD) and the People's Party (CDS-PP), won six seats. The Left in the European Parliament (The Left) gained four seats through the Left Bloc (BE) and the Unitary Democratic Coalition (CDU). Meanwhile, the Greens-European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA) was represented by People-Animals-Nature (PAN) and independent MEP Francisco Guerreiro, who together secured one seat.

There were several key issues that defined the debates in Portugal leading up to the

election. National politics played a significant role following the narrow victory of AD in the legislative elections. The resulting minority government under Prime Minister Luís Montenegro faces an uncertain future, with speculation emerging about renewed snap elections. Additionally, defense policy was a prominent issue, reflecting Portugal's strategic considerations within the EU framework. Immigration policy also emerged as a key topic, with discussions focusing on the country's policies and their alignment with broader European Union standards. This debate was intensified by the surge in support for the right-wing Chega, although in the end the party received far less support than anticipated.

## Year in Review

The key events of 2024 underscored the complex political, social, and environmental challenges facing Portugal. The snap elections highlighted an increasingly fragmented political landscape, with the rise of far-right populism reshaping national debates surrounding immigration. The government's new migration and asylum laws demonstrated Portugal's commitment to maintaining a balanced approach

to immigration, even as public opinion remained divided. Meanwhile, the devastating wildfires served as a stark reminder of the country's vulnerability to natural disasters and the need for stronger preventive measures.

These developments reflect broader trends within Portugal and the EU as a whole, including shifting political alignments, debates over migration policy, and the growing urgency of climate resilience. These events are interconnected in shaping Portugal's future, highlighting the country's need to continue on the path of maintaining and improving responsive governance, sustainable policies, and a cohesive approach to national and global challenges.

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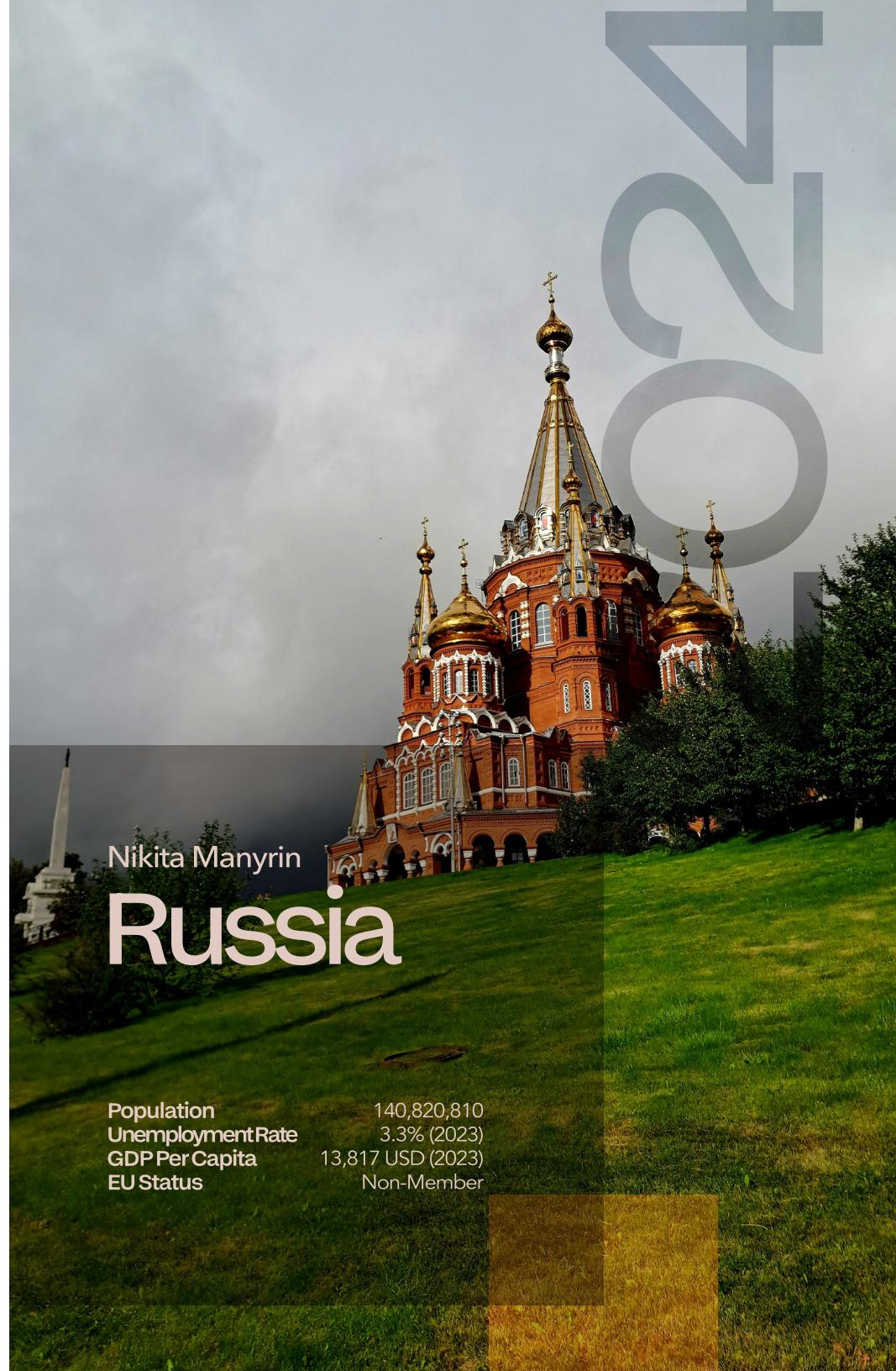
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## Introduction

Official Russian media has evolved its rhetoric while continuing to spin the Russo-Ukrainian War (RUW), as an existential, quasi-spiritual conflict. Russia has crystallized itself as the quintessence of the modern, militarist empire by embracing the war in public conscience and presenting it as a fiscally and morally responsible performance of masculinity.

Following Evgeny Prigozhin's attempted coup d'état in June of 2023, it became impossible for the Russian state to ignore the popular discontent with the tactical and operational mismanagement of the war. Prigozhin's shocking, vitriolic condemnation of top commanders Sergei Shoigu and Valery Gerasimov over the backdrop of dozens of dead Wagner mercenaries legitimately shook public confidence in the war - and thus in Russian President Vladimir Putin's state. The dysfunction of 2023 is crucial for assessing both Russia's de facto actions and its representation of these actions in official news cycles from 2024-2025.

## How Russophobia Legitimated Putin's Election

The official narrative espoused by Russian media is that Russia is a functional democracy that the Russophobic West judges as inherently autocratic. Russia's 2024 election highlights the tension between official state narratives and the lived experiences of voters.

Russia held its elections over three days, from March 15th to 17th, and recorded an unprecedented voter turnout and election result; Putin won 87.28% of the vote with a voter turnout of 77%. The election has been dubbed a landslide by foreign observers, and represents the staggering gulf between official representations of Putin's popularity relative to other political party leaders. For context, the closest candidate to Putin received just 4.31% of the vote.

To substantiate the high voter count, Russian media would promote stories of motivated, patriotic Siberian couples walking through blizzards just to vote. Simultaneously, it published articles detailing the improved voter registration and professionalism of the state's newly built voting centres. This two-pronged legitimization of Russian "democracy" represents a broader

trend in official Russian messaging, where the same conclusion — that Russian democracy is alive and fair, is substantiated through an extreme and a moderate explanation, respectively.

Additionally, Russian media framed the high turnout and Putin's popularity as a natural reaction to the actions of Ukraine and the West. Two days before election day on March 13th, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs accused the "collective west" of launching "around 170,000 cyber attacks daily" on the country's federal electoral system (Vyborg). Certain news agencies, like the Kremlin affiliated "Arguments and Facts" (Аргументы и Факты), would go on to use a figure like "12 million" cyber attacks only a day later. The credibility of the West and of international institutions regarding their ability to assess Russian "democracy" was also attacked less directly, through different arguments, in order to appeal to a more critical audience. For instance, state-affiliated RIA News would release op-eds effectively synonymizing western Russophobia with a kind of political racism that constituted the real cause for Putin's victory.

Objectively speaking, Russia's Central Electoral Commission (CEC, Центризбиркома) has

## The Kursk Invasion and Building a National Epic

On August 6th 2024, the AFU launched a surprise invasion into the Russian border region of Kursk. The official Russian position interpreted the invasion as a significant escalation due to the use of elite Ukrainian manpower and Western-supplied armour and artillery, as opposed to the sporadic raids by anti-Putin Russian mercenaries in 2023.

The invasion dealt a considerable logistical and political shock to Putin's government. Over 200,000 Russian civilians were forced to flee their homes after the AFU captured about 1,200 km<sup>2</sup> of area and forced multiple units to retreat. The chaos on the ground in Kursk can be inferred by the fact that any article released in the first days of the attack can only praise Russian victories elsewhere in Ukraine. This reveals the fact that the situation in Kursk was not stable enough to be framed as anything but Ukrainian barbarism.

The attack's spontaneity was interpreted as a feature of the Kyivan government's corruption, as an "international crime" indicative of the Ukrainian government's weakness. Some articles would even use generative AI to portray the Ukrainian flag as

a tub of filth housing a sneering aggressive rat. This sentiment would be substantiated officially by foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, who portrayed the invasion as a violent reaction to the benevolent Russian offer for peace. Multiple articles in the two weeks following Ukraine's invasion on August 6 would emphasize the humanitarian consequences of the invasion, focusing entirely on the government's effectiveness in evacuation and relocation efforts. Thus, official Russian coverage of the early days of the invasion primed audiences to view the invasion as a substantial escalation, representing an attack on Russian civic life from a "bloodthirsty" AFU.

As of October 2024, North Korean soldiers have been participating in combat in this area in order for Russian units to be deployed elsewhere in Ukraine. This combined force has retaken around 63% of the Kursk region, and has allegedly found evidence of Ukrainian war crimes similar to the Russian war crimes discovered in Bucha. Notably, this accusation has not been corroborated by any organization outside of Russia, unlike the Bucha massacre. Nevertheless, the presence of such an accusation in the Russian cultural imaginary symbolizes an attempt to dehumanize the AFU, and to

draw comparisons to the Nazi occupation of the same region. By presenting a united front with North Korea, Russia can potentially spin the recapture of Kursk as a victory against the "nazism" of Ukraine, which they alleged has behaved similarly to the Wehrmacht.

## The Expansion of Roskomnadzor (RKN) and The Discord Ban

Roskomnadzor is Russia's federal internet and telecommunication censorship agency, literally translating to "Russian communication monitor". Since the start of the RUW, its resources and capabilities have been expanded to enforce new draconian legislation against the freedom of opinion and to monitor any potential discontent amongst Russians. The censorship of internet activity has been used to target young Russians specifically, culminating in the extremely unpopular ban of the Discord communication app.

In 2022, the New York Times gained access to over 160,000 documents from one of RKN's regional offices, revealing how websites and people were classified as either "pro-government", "anti-government" or "apolitical" only four days after the invasion. As a

result of this system, over 1,200 anti-war protestors were detained within the first week of the invasion. By 2024, Russia would announce a \$660 million budget expansion to RKN's capacity for censorship and traffic monitoring.

Since the war began, RKN would work closely with the "League for Internet Safety" (LIS, Лига Безопасного Интернета) to establish curricula for schools to teach "media literacy" and "internet safety". The organization means to do this by teaching children how to identify "extremist content", "LGBT propaganda" and "fake news". Moreover, it encourages parents to monitor their children's internet usage, and to report any such websites that their child uses on the first page of the organization's website. Consequently, freedom of expression for young people is heavily stifled — instead, it is funneled and redirected through state-endorsed cultural expressions. An example of this would be the government's prosecution of 22 year-old rapper Scally Milano, who LIS forced to apologize and pay a fine for referring to the production of drugs in his songs.

In October, efforts to monitor youth culture culminated in the banning of Discord, a communication app with over 150

million monthly users worldwide as of 2024. In addition to being one of the most popular apps amongst young people, the app was also used by Russian soldiers to coordinate operational maneuvers in Ukraine in lieu of more up-to-date Russian communications. The ban caused negative reactions from both sides of the political spectrum and reveals how alienated young people are by virtue of Russia's demography — most people in the country are above the age of 39 and do not use or have a reason to understand the value of Discord.

## Year in Review

The last year represents the consolidation of civil society and foreshadows the totalitarianism that Putin hopes to achieve for Russia in the near-future. The rhetoric of mainstream Russian media is indicative of a state that sees itself as civilationally exceptional, as not needing to abide by the expectations, or conventions, that it portrays as inherently degenerate. This official view has deviated very little from the infamous Novikov Telegram of 1946. This document warned the USSR's leadership about how international organizations like the UN are tools of American foreign policy before they are a neutral

arbiter of "human rights". Since his address at Munich in 2008, Putin has revived this Machiavellian interpretation and made it a matter of state policy. Russian exceptionalism, rooted in the country's legacy of empire, is not new whatsoever. What is new is the concerted effort to make Russians hate Ukrainians as a collective. The pretense of "denazification" that Putin used to justify February 22 was targeted directly at the "clique of Nazis and drug addicts in Kyiv that have taken the Ukrainian people hostage". Now, the label of Nazi, and accordingly the scope of dehumanization officially permitted by the Russian state, has been expanded to include AFU soldiers in Kursk. The abyss between Ukraine and Russia as well as Ukrainians and Russians has been crystallized to include an ethnic dimension — the conceptual link between Ukrainian nationhood and the Einsatzgruppen has been reified. Implying that Ukrainians hold a racist contempt for Russians crystallizes what Michael Ignatieff refers to as "communities of fear" in *The Warrior's Honor*, he discusses this as a prerequisite step for the kind of ethnic strife that traumatized former Yugoslavia.

Russia's political ethos will continue to pose an innate threat to that of the European

Union, though its influence over the domestic politics of member-states (MSs) will certainly vary. While those with stronger civil societies and democratic traditions such as France may be impervious, they were never the targets in the first place. The "Russian world", Russkiy Mir, that Putin seeks to establish will be in eastern Europe. The EU must self-reflect and self-improve to prevent the kind of "one-sided political perspective" that unilaterally vetoed North Macedonia's ascension in 2019. Brussels must address the irredentism that Bulgaria has selfishly imposed on the ascension negotiation process in order to actually integrate North Macedonia into the EU. The EU must show solidarity for national self-determination if it wants to counter the wave of despotism washing over 2025.

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# Slovenia

Population  
Unemployment Rate  
GDP Per Capita  
EU Status

2,097,893  
3.6% (2023)  
48,100 USD (2023)  
EU Member

## SLOVENIA

Ankur Phadke

### Introduction

2024 was a year of major social and political change in Slovenia's domestic atmosphere. In terms of its EU relations, Slovenia saw an increase in support for the far-right and left parties in the European Parliament Elections. To round up the year of domestic change, the Slovenian populace passed landmark approval of referendums on medical cannabis and personal cannabis legalization, election reforms, and voluntary euthanasia. Espionage remained an alarming threat to Slovenia's sovereignty as European-Russian tensions continued. Furthermore, the Slovenia healthcare system was struck by a nationwide strike following the medical union's discontent with healthcare workers' compensation policy.

### European Parliament Elections

On June 9th, the European Parliament Elections were held in Slovenia to elect the country's representatives of the 9 Slovenian seats in the European Parliament. In a sign of renewal of political participation, this election recorded the largest turnout for Slovenia, at 41.8% of eligible voters. Amidst national issues of healthcare and the economy, the recognition of

Palestine was a central issue for the voters in this election. In response, the ex-Prime Minister Janša raised concerns about the "abusing" of the election to raise nonissues by the incumbent party. While the conservative Slovenian Democratic Party (SDP) dominated with 4 seats, the newly incumbent left-leaning Freedom Party debuted with 2 seats. In response, Prime Minister Golob – belonging to the Freedom Party – celebrated the growing popularity of the party and remarked on the positive futures "in the next general election." His SDP counterpart, Janša rejoiced by denoting the election results as a "message of the Slovenian voters to the incumbent government" of their solidarity with the conservatives. This increase in support for both the left and right-leaning parties reflects the growing polarization of the country with an absent intermediate.

Referendums

In efforts to increase voter turnout at the European Parliament Elections, the Slovenian legislature attached four concurrent non-binding referendums to the ballots on June 9, 2024. This decision was issued as a way for the Slovenian government to gauge public opinion on specific issues. The four issues posed were voluntary euthanasia, preferential

election reforms, medical cannabis usage, and personal cannabis usage. In response, the Slovenian populace supported all of these measures. Interestingly, an outcry from environmentalists led the government to vote to cancel a referendum on the construction of a new nuclear plant on 24th October 2024. The political debates during the 2024 referendums highlighted the growing left-right polarization of Slovenian politics. While the right-wing parties opposed the installment as a tactic by the incumbent government to elicit election support, the left praised this venture to increase voter participation. The left-right polarization and passage of all the referendum topics highlighted the increasing proximity of Slovenians to the European Union and a greater European culture.

*Consultative referendum on the regulation of the right to assistance to end life voluntarily in 2024.*

The first referendum issue of voluntary euthanasia sought to gain insight into the populace's support for the regulation of assisted, voluntary end-of-life. This measure gained 54.89% approval from Slovenian voters.

*Consultative referendum on the introduction of preferential voting for the elections to the National Assembly in 2024.*

The second referendum issue of preferential voting sought to consult people's approval to introduce a preferential voting system for the future National Assembly Elections. This measure gained 70.89% support from the eligible Slovenian voters.

*Consultative referendum on the cultivation and processing of cannabis for medical purposes 2024.*

The third referendum issue of medical cannabis sought to know if the Slovenian populace would support the legalization of medical cannabis harvesting and processing. This measure passed with 66.71% approval from the eligible Slovenian voters.

*Consultative referendum on the cultivation and possession of cannabis for limited personal use 2024.*

The fourth referendum issue of personal cannabis usage consulted on the Slovenian populace's support of the legalization of personal cannabis

harvesting and processing. This measure was approved by 51.57% of the eligible Slovenian voters.

### Russian Espionage Crises

In an ode to the growing tensions between European countries and Russia since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, there were major updates to cases of Russian espionage in Slovenia. After two Russian spies were arrested in Ljubljana in 2022 by the Slovenian Security and Intelligence Agency agents on charges of espionage against the Slovenian government, a lengthy court battle ensued. After the twenty-month mark, the two individuals were sentenced to nineteen months for false identities and espionage. Having already served the given sentence, they were swiftly deported to Russia and barred from entering the country for five years rather than serving additional time. Russian President Putin personally welcomed the deportees upon their release, making a bold statement against Slovenia's stance towards these individuals as criminals. Separately, a Russian diplomat was declared persona non grata under Article 9 of the Vienna Convention of Diplomatic Relations for conspiracy against Slovenia. In retaliation, Moscow demanded Slovenia

decrease its staff occupancy at its embassy. The ramifications of this crisis are instrumental in increasing the country's proximity to the European nations on collective security issues and countering Russian threats to their sovereignty.

### Healthcare Strike

Healthcare workers in Slovenia organized a strike led by the failure of their union (FIDES) and the government to create protective pay pillars in public healthcare in January 2024. In response, the government issued a decree determining the "scope of services" workers must offer their patients. In attempts to challenge the seeming encroachment of government protocol, FIDES launched a Constitutional Court challenge. The union head stated how they believed these attempts to prevent medical workers from successfully striking, and they would "[continue] to strike" until their demands were met. Upon the two-month continuation of the strike, the national healthcare department launched an inspection of the state of patient care. The government reported that there were generally no violations of patient treatment guidelines and the healthcare workers were providing required care in due diligence. On April

9, 2024, the government and FIDES representatives relayed their inability to come to meet on common grounds upon months of constant deliberation. In response, the European Junior Doctors Association declared their continual support for FIDES. In their statement, they mentioned how their support for Slovenia was symbolic of their necessity to counter "broader challenges faced across Europe" regarding the treatment of healthcare workers following the pandemic. As the year rounded out, a FIDES representative discussed how they had successfully led the longest healthcare strike in Slovenian history, while maintaining a quality patient service. They further stated that they hoped to end the strike, but would not relent unless proper protections for the medical profession were achieved. With the FIDES strike being a part of a continent-wide trend of degrading relations between governments and healthcare worker unions, it becomes integral for European countries to increase dialogue on adapting to the post-COVID healthcare industry.

## Year in Review

Entering into 2025 leads Slovenia into confronting the

same domestic and foreign issues from 2024, while also facing a new challenge of mediating the political struggles between the left and right factions of the country. The continuation of the Russian-EU crisis will serve to alarm the country to secure its sovereign integrity from falling prey to Russian espionage. With no sight to an end for the year-long healthcare strike by FIDES, Slovenia will certainly have to reengage in dialogue with the union to come to a cooperative agreement on pay pillars. Most of all, however, 2025 will decide the fate of future party relations in the government before the elections in 2026.

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Sarahi Giles Candela

# Spain

**Population** 48,736,000  
**Unemployment Rate** 11.4% (Sep 2024)  
**GDP Per Capita** 58,192 USD  
**EU Status** EU Member

## SPAIN

*Sarahi Giles Candela*

### Spain's Call for Unity in Europe's Migration Challenge to the Canary Islands

The Canary Islands have become a focal point for Europe's ongoing migration challenge due to their strategic geographic location along key migration routes from West Africa to Europe. Speaking in parliament on October 9, 2024, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez announced plans to request the European Commission to expedite the implementation of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, moving its timeline from 2026 to 2025. This decision reflects Spain's growing concern about the increasing number of irregular migrants arriving in the Canary Islands and the strain it places on regional institutions.

The Pact, which was initially proposed in 2020, seeks to create a more cohesive and resilient framework for managing migration across the continent. It introduces mechanisms for screening, border procedures, and a new solidarity mechanism requiring all member states to contribute, whether through relocation efforts or financial support. Key components of it include the establishment of a common asylum procedure, enhanced cooperation with third

countries to address migration drivers, and improved returns for those not eligible for protection. The aim is to balance responsibility and solidarity, ensuring frontline states like Spain, Italy, and Greece are not disproportionately burdened.

Spain saw 63,970 irregular migrants arrive in 2024, marking a 12.5% increase from the previous year's 56,852 arrivals. The situation is particularly severe for underage migrants, who fall under the jurisdiction of autonomous regional institutions. On January 2, 2025, Spanish Minister for Territorial Policy Ángel Víctor Torres emphasized that overcrowding persists in the Canary Islands and Ceuta due to the Popular Party's (PP) refusal to support the redistribution of these minors across other regions. This humanitarian crisis underscores the need for greater cooperation within Spain and across the European Union to manage migration effectively.

The Spanish government has sought support from the EU in addressing these challenges. Spain has requested that Frontex patrol the coasts of West Africa, and Senegal is set to receive €30 million from the EU to help curb migration at its source. Additionally, Spain has voiced opposition to the establishment of migration centers

outside EU borders, advocating instead for a unified, humane response to migration pressures.

The proposed early implementation of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum could provide more resources for border management, accelerate migrant redistribution among member states, and promote shared responsibility. Spain's proactive stance highlights the need for solidarity in responding to migration flows, particularly as the Canary Islands' strategic location near the West African coast makes them a frontline for migration into the EU and a focal point within EU migration policy. Addressing this crisis requires not only swift action but also a commitment to balancing security concerns with humanitarian principles. The question now is whether Europe will rise to this challenge or allow the islands to remain an isolated outpost in an unresolved crisis.

### Spain's Economic Growth: A Model of Balanced Progress

The Spanish economy has exceeded expectations in 2024, driven by strong employment growth, a dynamic foreign sector and increased investment fueled by the EU-funded Recovery Plan.

According to official projections, Spain's growth outpaces initial estimates, signaling resilience amid broader global uncertainties. Employment rates reflect this success, more Spaniards are actively contributing to the economy boosting domestic consumption and social cohesion.

Investment, a key engine of this growth, is expected to remain robust throughout the projection period. The Recovery Plan has incentivized both public and private sector initiatives, particularly in sectors like renewable energy, digital infrastructure, and sustainable transport. As businesses gain confidence in Spain's economic trajectory, investment levels continue to rise, reinforcing long-term stability.

This growth story, however, is not merely about numbers. It underscores a policy framework that prioritizes inclusivity and shared prosperity. The government's focus on wealth redistribution, as articulated by Sánchez, aims to ensure that economic gains benefit all citizens, not just a privileged few. This approach aligns with broader EU principles of social cohesion and economic convergence.

Despite these positive developments, some economic analysts urge caution suggesting that while Spain's economic

performance in 2024 is a reason for optimism, structural challenges remain. These include potential external shocks, inflationary pressures, and the need for continued fiscal responsibility.

Nevertheless, the Spanish government remains confident that by 2027, Spain will be in an even stronger position, building on the progress made in recent years. As economic policies continue to focus on investment, employment, and social equity, Spain's growth model may serve as a reference for other European nations navigating post-pandemic recovery.

### Spain and Portugal's Bilateral Relationship

The recently implemented Joint Declaration between Spain and Portugal covers key areas such as economic growth, sustainable development, and cross-border solidarity. The agreement aims to enhance competitiveness while ensuring a just ecological and digital transition. Leaders from both nations have expressed confidence that these measures will drive mutual economic benefits and reinforce their shared commitment to the European project. Among the key provisions of the declaration, both countries have pledged to enhance joint

infrastructure projects, streamline trade and investment procedures, and promote research and innovation partnerships. These initiatives are expected to create new economic opportunities and strengthen the Iberian Peninsula's position in the European economy. As part of their strengthened ties, Spain and Portugal have renewed their Cross-Border Tourism Strategy, prioritizing triple sustainability—economic, social, and environmental. This initiative aims to position the Iberian Peninsula as a leading global tourist destination while integrating innovative and eco-friendly practices. Both governments seek to leverage their natural and cultural assets to enhance competitiveness in the tourism sector. The strategy emphasizes the development of smart tourism, digital transformation in hospitality services, and support for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the tourism industry. Additionally, both countries are working on joint promotional campaigns to attract visitors from emerging markets, further strengthening their global tourism profile.

Beyond bilateral agreements, Spain and Portugal are advocating for a new approach to EU-Africa relations, emphasizing economic partnerships and

sustainable development. The two nations are calling for increased European investment in African infrastructure, as well as policies that promote trade and financial stability between the continents. Additionally, the two countries continue to collaborate in addressing shared challenges, such as wildfire prevention and regional security, underscoring their commitment to multilateralism and cooperative policymaking.

During a recent summit, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez emphasized that the strategic cooperation between Spain and Portugal is rooted in a renewed confidence in European unity and multilateral governance. Portuguese Prime Minister António Costa echoed these sentiments, highlighting the importance of Iberian leadership in shaping the future of European diplomacy and sustainability initiatives.

Looking ahead, the reinforced Spain-Portugal alliance is expected to yield long-term economic and social benefits, further solidifying their positions as key European players. By prioritizing innovation, sustainability, and cross-border cooperation, both nations are setting a precedent for regional partnerships within the European Union. With growing emphasis on green energy

cooperation, technology-driven industrial policies, and shared infrastructure investments, the relationship between Spain and Portugal is poised to become a model for bilateral partnerships in the EU. As these initiatives unfold, Spain and Portugal will continue working together to navigate future challenges and capitalize on shared opportunities, strengthening their historical ties in the process.

## Year in Review

2024 has been a year of significant developments for Spain, both in terms of its domestic policies and its role within the broader European context. Spain's economic growth, fueled by strong investment and employment, serves as a model of balanced progress and social equity within the EU, which holds promise for economic and social prosperity. As Spain continues to navigate both internal and external challenges, its policies of inclusivity, sustainability, and multilateralism will play a pivotal role in shaping the future of Europe.

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## Introduction

2024 was a year of change for Sweden—this change referring not to the impact of shifting global conditions but rather the change it forged itself through new policy. Its accession to NATO changed the course of history, charting not only a new diplomatic orientation but also a reformulation of Swedish national identity. While Sweden's stance on migration was consistent with previous years, 2024 marked its pinnacle: for the first time in over 50 years, net emigration occurred. Similarly, Sweden had been facing sluggish economic growth since the end of 2023, but took measures never seen in recent years to handle it. Surprisingly, the elections revealed a more consistent look with previous years: the left made gains and the environment was a top priority, standing in stark contrast against Europe's general results. As Swedes head into 2025, they face a different domestic landscape than years ago, but they continue to hold onto the vision of Europe they have carried for a long time.

### Accession to NATO – One for All and All for One

Ending two centuries of unwavering neutrality and military

non-alignment, Sweden joined NATO on March 7th 2024. This marked not only a new era for foreign policy but heralded a new national identity for Sweden— one based on its re-assessment of the role it plays in securing peace in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. For the first time in Brussels, Sweden's flag flew alongside the alliance's 31 others, reflecting its commitment to what Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson says Sweden has always believed in: freedom. But the pact itself is a sharp turn from the diplomacy Sweden had been practicing thus far, resulting in mixed reactions from the public.

Military leaders emphasized NATO accession will enhance Sweden's security through collective deterrence under Article 5: 'one for all and all for one.' However, former diplomat Jan Eliasson claimed Sweden forever lost its strength of neutral diplomacy. Others warned that while Article 5 is ideologically appealing, it could entangle Sweden in foreign conflict. The government took measures to inform the public about NATO's benefits by integrating NATO education into schools and launching online campaigns. Yet this has not been enough to quell the fear among the public—particularly youth—who flooded

the national children's helpline following Defence Minister Carl-Oskar Bohlin's warning that "there could be war in Sweden".

While accession to NATO promises a prominent new role in upholding peace in the north, it begs a social acceptance from Swedes themselves, which is yet to be seen. For the first time, they feel they must concern themselves with the possibility of war.

### Migration Woes: National Security First

2024 saw the pinnacle of Sweden's hardline stance on migration to-date, yielding the country's first net population outflow in over half a century. Asylum-related permits plummeted to their lowest levels since 1985. Prime Minister Kristersson described this as the beginning of the government's measures aimed at combating migrants' failure in integrating into Swedish society. He says this is in line with Swedish voters' wishes.

This stance stems from fear—fear of a repeat of the 2015 migrant crisis, where Sweden welcomed the highest number of migrants per capita in Europe, and fear of the rise in organized crime and extremism that followed it, as Sweden grapples with one of

Europe's highest gun death rates.

Yet experts argue crime is driven more by poverty and high unemployment than by failures in migrant integration. High unemployment in particular is a valid explanation, seeing that Sweden grapples with one of the highest unemployment rates in the EU (revisited in the next section). Since unemployment is a large problem however, many fear migrants have become scapegoats for the issue. Notably, the government's 2.5 billion kronor spent on paying 350,000 per immigrant who leaves the country is almost double the amount spent on integration efforts. This led to experts and citizens arguing for better handling of the issue, cautioning Sweden could counterproductively harm integration efforts by alienating not only incoming migrants but currently-settled ones as well.

Already, this hostility has permeated into social life with Christian Democrats Youth Leader Ebba Busch proposing to abolish the right to vote for non-citizens. While these developments echoed Europe's broader retreat from liberal migration policy, Sweden felt heightened tensions on its own soil. Mounting anxiety about keeping society safe has sparked debate on what the best course of action is.

## The Rate Cut Still Wasn't Cutting It: Battling a Recession

Similar to its political challenges, Sweden's economic challenges weren't new—but they prompted some of the most unprecedented responses seen in years. As the new year approached, Sweden braced for a recession. GDP had been declining, and consumption had been falling for five straight quarters, largely attributed to rising household debt and a construction sector slump that had worried economists for months. Already, Sweden was dealing with one of the highest household debt rates in the EU. Housing projects and industrial investments kept being postponed, freezing spending even more. The construction slump alone could cost Sweden around 100 billion by 2030 if it doesn't get resolved.

In August, Sweden's Riksbank cut the interest rate for the second time during the year, setting it at 3.5%. In October, 4.2% inflation exceeded the bank's expectations but was still too far from the target. By 2024's end, the Riksbank implemented the largest reduction in over a decade, reducing the rate to 2.75%. This decision underscored the need to

encourage spending and stimulate the economy.

The year concluded with a modest growth rate of 0.6%, with hope for light recovery in 2025. While unemployment remains among the highest in the EU and growth projections place Sweden among the lowest in the EU, these figures are still better than initial recession forecasts. But however unprecedented the rate cuts are, it will take time for their effects to permeate through the economy and for Swedes to feel a rise in purchasing power.

## The Swedes Spoke, and not Very Differently from Before: The EU Elections

The Swedish vision for the EU was revealed on June 9th. The results stood in contrast both from the rest of Europe and from popular rhetoric within the country. Like in the previous election, the Social Democrats won, with 25% of the vote this time, gaining 5 seats. The Moderate Party won 4 seats, and the Greens and Sweden Democrats won 3 seats each. Unlike the rest of Europe, Sweden (and its Nordic neighbours) experienced a retreat of far-right support.

The right-wing Sweden Democrats experienced failure to improve upon previous election

results since the party's founding for the first time. A scandal in May did much to rock their chances. A television station alleged they had been operating fake social media accounts to spread anti-immigrant material and attack political opponents. The party claimed this allegation was the left's attempt to undermine them, and continued to tout aggressive stances on immigration, announcing "my Europe builds walls," and the Social Democrats have "blood on their hands" (referring to their supposed inaction on crime).

Yet immigration and crime were not among the top issues on voter's minds. Swedes were much more concerned about the environment, with polling showing seven in ten Swedes demand stronger climate action. This translated to Sweden's continued strong presence on the European Parliament's environment committee. Overall, these results revealed despite the country's hardline stance on immigration in recent years, climate continues to be the priority for Swedes when it comes to the future of the EU.

## Year in Review

2024 was a year of extremes at home. Policies on immigration and the economy set

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## Introduction

Switzerland is known worldwide as the third richest country in terms of GDP per capita, a dynamism based in particular on the luxury of its chocolate and watchmaking. But Switzerland is also renowned for its political particularities. The 1848 Constitution divided power between the Federal Council, the executive organ made up of 7 members and the Parliament, composed of two legislative chambers with equal powers. The National Council, the lower house, is elected by proportional suffrage and counts 200 members. The Council of States, the upper house, represents the cantons, each with two councillors. The people dominate the political system, having the power to contest a parliamentary decision and to amend the constitution through referendums, which reflect the population's evolutive concerns. Neutrality has always remained firmly anchored in Swiss interests. They refused to join the European Union (EU) and the Nord Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) but benefit from a special form of cooperation. While Switzerland did not hold national elections in 2024, it was still affected by the political upheavals shaking Europe,

observing increased support for its far-right party, renegotiating its partnership with EU countries and reassessing its definition of neutrality.

### The Rise of the Far Right, a Common Tendency with European Countries

Switzerland has seen a significant increase in far-right influence embodied by the SVP (UDC in French). Their political agenda includes immigration, national preference and euroscepticism, priorities defended by other European rightist movements. These ideas are defended on social networks, the main means of communication, based on a "them vs. us" dichotomy and elements of vocabulary such as "wokism" and "remigration". The war in Ukraine has intensified debates over immigration and insecurity, with the arrival of 80,000 refugees in Switzerland. The SVP gained support among rural, less-educated male voters, a pattern observed in other European far-right parties. Rural areas record twice as many votes for the SVP as urban areas. Through its targeted, digitalized communication strategy, the SVP is attracting young people and mobilizing this less politicized electorate. In the

2023 federal elections, the SVP succeeded in winning almost 30% of the vote, results their French and German counterparts also recently achieved in the polls. Their influence is already visible and concrete. Ecological issues are being sidelined and female representation in public institutions is declining.

First, unlike many European far-right parties that were explicitly nationalist from the outset, the SVP's roots lie in centrist regional politics. Second, the Swiss political system imposes institutional constraints, limiting SVP's dominance and unchecked power, feared in neighboring countries with similar extremist tendencies. Referendums are frequent in Switzerland's direct democracy and thus normalized. Consequently, voter turnout is relatively low compared to other European countries, ensuring the fluidity of opinion and hindering long-term political dominance. In 2023, turnout was around 45% for federal elections, compared with 66% for legislative elections in France. Finally, even if they won the majority of seats in the National Council with around 28% of the votes, it is still not approaching the 51% majority needed to unilaterally control the Federal Council, elected by the lower house of the Parliament. The rise of the far right

placed the country at a crossroads between international cooperation and national retrenchment.

### The Evolution of the Relation Between Switzerland and the European Union

Like the member states, the relationship between Switzerland and its neighbors has been built primarily on the economy. In 1960, Switzerland joined EFTA, an extended free-trade area, but in 1992 the Swiss rejected membership of the European Economic Area. A series of agreements, "Bilaterals I and II", were later signed in 1999 and 2004, extending cooperation in the political sphere to new areas such as research, youth via Erasmus and the environment. This series of initiatives illustrate the country's desire for collaboration, while firmly rejecting political integration.

Switzerland's reluctance to integrate comes from concerns over sovereignty and direct democracy. Its system allows citizens to voice their thoughts on key issues regularly. It highlights the volatility of their opinions which prevents the creation of a lasting loyalty towards European partners. The Swiss fear restrictive European law and bureaucracy. Switzerland wants to keep control on its priority topics

which are currently immigration and agriculture. For immigration for example, they voted for a constitutional amendment introducing quotas in 2014, contradicting the free movement principle anchored in the European Schengen agreement. Switzerland's agricultural sector is heavily subsidized and protected from international competition through tariffs, a system incompatible with European agreements such as the one with Mercosur. Additionally, the common rise of far-right parties has been positively correlated with Euroscepticism. Finally, Switzerland tries to maintain its unassailable image of international mediator. Because of its solid sovereignty, it has traditionally been regarded as a trusted partner, with little influence from geographically proximate players. However, the many international geopolitical crises are forcing Switzerland to restructure its relations with the EU.

The tense global context led Switzerland and the EU to realize the importance of collaboration, and to open up to compromises while negotiations had been at a standstill since 2021. New agreements have been concluded in 2025, notably in the fields of environmental protection, health, and food safety. A compromise was for example

agreed regarding mobility of people. Switzerland obtained the right to limit immigration but will in return facilitate the integration of European students. The outcomes of these negotiations divided the Swiss, prompting a referendum for 2026 to settle the issue.

### A New Interpretation of Swiss Neutrality in the Context of the War In Ukraine

Swiss neutrality traces its origins to the Napoleonic Wars when Switzerland refused to join the German federal state and resisted becoming a satellite state of France or Austria. It has been applied since 1815 but the evolution of international affairs is calling into question the concept of neutrality in Europe. The Swedes and the Finns abandoned it to apply for NATO membership. While Ireland and Austria have not joined NATO, their decision to join the EU revealed their intentions. Switzerland looks set to be the next to decide.

Before the war, Switzerland was the third-largest investor in Ukraine. The Russian aggression slowed Switzerland's economy, exposing its dependence to European neighbors especially for energy with three quarters of its sources coming from abroad.

Switzerland promptly joined the European sanctions against Russia, justifying its action by condemning the breach of international law. Switzerland simultaneously forbade European countries from transferring weapons of Swiss origin to Ukraine. This solidly-founded fortress of sovereignty and diplomacy is being accused of inconsistency, hindering its credibility on the international scene. It's important to note that Switzerland has already followed European initiatives in the past, in Yugoslavia for example, because these countries uphold the same democratic values, enshrined in the Swiss Constitution. However, this conflict seems different in that European countries have responded unanimously to the war while Switzerland did not maintain this line of conduct, isolating itself.

The principle of neutrality dictates that Switzerland cannot participate in any armed conflict, with the sole exception of its self-defence. But this definition is too simplistic for the current complex international order which reveals a spectrum of possibilities between a rigid and a fluid interpretation of neutrality. It can be an instrument for security policy, for foreign affairs and the economy. In the past, this concept served to maintain Switzerland's isolation

and protection while it is today defending international law. This question is tearing the Swiss population apart, as neutrality is a factor of national identity that links linguistic communities. Despite these challenges, Switzerland remains committed to conflict prevention and diplomacy. It organizes for instance exchanges with Ukrainian and Russian players on post-war organization. However, its system of direct democracy, founded on frequent popular consultations, can hinder decision-making in addressing fast-evolving issues, weakening its position on the international stage.

### Year in Review

To conclude, Switzerland is not completely isolated from European issues, even if it has tried to remain at a distance. It has shown itself capable of compromise to renegotiate its alliances with the EU in the face of international crises such as the war in Ukraine. These issues question the Swiss neutrality, but its flexible interpretation is a strong and reliable asset, enabling the country to adapt to the geopolitical realities and to protect its vital interests. However, even if the Swiss system of democracy is a solid safeguard against the rise of the far-right, it

precludes loyalty to partners and limits long-term predictability. Simultaneously, its long-held status of trusted mediator is increasingly challenged by emerging powers such as China or Saudi Arabia who hosted negotiations between the United States and Russia in March 2025, signaling a shift in the global order.

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## Introduction

Türkiye's role in international politics has remained a focal point throughout 2024, continuing a complex trajectory that has defined its relations with key global actors. From its involvement in the Ukraine war to its military strategy in Syria and its ongoing EU accession process, Ankara continues to navigate multifaceted geopolitical challenges. While Türkiye has long sought to position itself as a regional power, its foreign policy decisions have placed it at the center of both strategic alliances and controversies.

The country's approach to diplomacy has evolved significantly in response to shifting global dynamics. Over the years, Türkiye's foreign policy has reflected its ambitions of expanding influence beyond its immediate neighborhood while maintaining strong economic and security ties with major global powers. However, these ambitions have been met with scrutiny from Western allies, particularly regarding Ankara's democratic backsliding, and military interventions in Syria. The balancing act between asserting national interests and sustaining international alliances has led to fluctuating diplomatic relationships, particularly with the European

Union and NATO partners.

Türkiye's recent foreign policy maneuvers highlight the complexities of maintaining its strategic autonomy while navigating an increasingly polarized world. From deepening its defense cooperation with Ukraine to diplomatic overtures towards the European Union, Ankara's position remains one of calculated pragmatism. Meanwhile, domestic media coverage continues to shape public perception, with pro-government outlets portraying these developments as strategic victories while opposition voices raise concerns about the long-term implications of these policies.

This article examines three major developments shaping Türkiye's position on the global stage, providing a chronological account of events and perspectives from various news sources.

## Türkiye's Role in the Ukraine War

Türkiye has played a multifaceted role in the Ukraine conflict, navigating between its NATO commitments, its defense partnerships with Ukraine, and its longstanding yet delicate relationship with Russia. While Ankara has supplied Ukraine with critical military aid, including its

signature Bayraktar TB2 drones, it has simultaneously positioned itself as a mediator, attempting to broker peace negotiations between Moscow and Kyiv.

Despite Türkiye's military support for Ukraine, Russia has expressed strong disapproval, accusing Ankara of undermining its security interests while still engaging in diplomatic negotiations with Moscow. This dual approach reflects Türkiye's broader geopolitical ambitions: it seeks to align more closely with Western partners while ensuring that it does not sever its economic and strategic ties with Russia. Analysts describe this balancing act as a "double-edged sword," where Ankara's foreign policy decisions carry both risks and rewards. Despite tensions, Türkiye remains committed to maintaining a strategic dialogue with Russia, particularly in energy cooperation and regional security, demonstrating that its relationship with Moscow remains complex and indispensable.

## Syria's Complex Chessboard: Türkiye's Military and Diplomatic Strategy

Türkiye's military involvement in Syria has been a pivotal aspect of its regional

policy, shaped by both national security concerns and geopolitical ambitions. Ankara has long viewed military operations against Kurdish groups, particularly the YPG, as essential to countering perceived security threats along its southern border. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has consistently framed these interventions as a safeguard for Turkey's national security, though they have drawn criticism from the European Union due to concerns over territorial integrity and broader stability in the region.

Throughout 2024, diplomatic efforts to mend relations with Syria gradually intensified. Until December, Ankara pursued reconciliation talks with Damascus, largely driven by domestic political pressure to address the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis. These discussions reflected Türkiye's pragmatic approach in balancing military operations with diplomatic overtures, as it sought to secure both stability and security. However, skepticism remained high regarding the viability of any rapprochement with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, as opposition groups feared that normalization could mark the end of their struggle against the regime.

A turning point came on December 8, when the Syrian militant group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham

(HTS) led a decisive campaign that resulted in the collapse of Assad's authoritarian rule. While Türkiye did not directly support HTS, it provided drones and military equipment to allied Syrian rebel factions, particularly the Syrian National Army (SNA), which remains heavily backed by Ankara. The fall of Assad's regime was perceived as a major geopolitical victory for Türkiye, reinforcing its influence in the region and raising questions about the future governance of Syria.

With Assad's regime dismantled, debates have intensified within Türkiye regarding the fate of the millions of Syrian refugees residing in the country. The prospect of large-scale repatriation has emerged as a key issue, with policymakers deliberating on the feasibility of returning displaced Syrians to a post-Assad Syria. However, concerns remain regarding the stability of the region and whether a safe and structured return process can be ensured. As Türkiye navigates this new chapter in its Syrian policy, the balance between military strategy and diplomatic recalibration will shape its long-term approach to the conflict.

## EU Relations

Türkiye's relationship with the European Union has remained stagnant, with accession negotiations effectively frozen since 2018. However, 2024 saw a renewed push for dialogue, with Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan attending an informal EU foreign ministers' meeting in Brussels, marking the first such engagement in five years. While this diplomatic gesture signalled Ankara's willingness to recalibrate its EU relations, significant hurdles remain.

The European Commission's latest annual report on Türkiye reiterated deep concerns over democratic backsliding, judicial independence, and press freedoms, reinforcing the existing obstacles to membership. Nevertheless, Ankara remains an indispensable partner for the EU, particularly in matters of migration, security, and energy cooperation.

Despite these challenges, recent meetings between Türkiye and EU officials indicate a potential thaw in relations, with both sides exploring avenues for renewed cooperation. However, skepticism persists among EU member states such as France and Germany, which remain reluctant to re-engage with accession talks unless Ankara

implements substantial political reforms. Ultimately, Türkiye's EU ambitions remain uncertain, caught in a complex web of geopolitical calculations and domestic constraints.

## Year in Review

Relations between Türkiye and its traditional Western allies remain at a pivotal juncture, defined by both cooperation and contention. While Ankara has deepened economic and security ties with the European Union, disputes over democratic governance, and defense strategy continue to hinder full rapprochement.

Türkiye's foreign policy has increasingly pivoted toward strengthening ties with Russia and China, signalling a shift in its geopolitical strategy. However, Ankara continues to assert its commitment to European integration, as seen in its efforts to renew dialogue with the EU and participate in broader European security discussions. Political analysts argue that Türkiye is playing a strategic balancing act, leveraging its unique position between East and West to secure its national interests.

Looking ahead, the question remains whether Ankara

will prioritize deeper alignment with Europe or further reinforce its independent diplomatic path. The upcoming year will be crucial in determining the trajectory of Türkiye's foreign relations, with significant implications for its role in global affairs. As Ankara seeks to navigate its relationships with both traditional allies and emerging partners, its foreign policy decisions will shape not only its domestic landscape but also its international standing.

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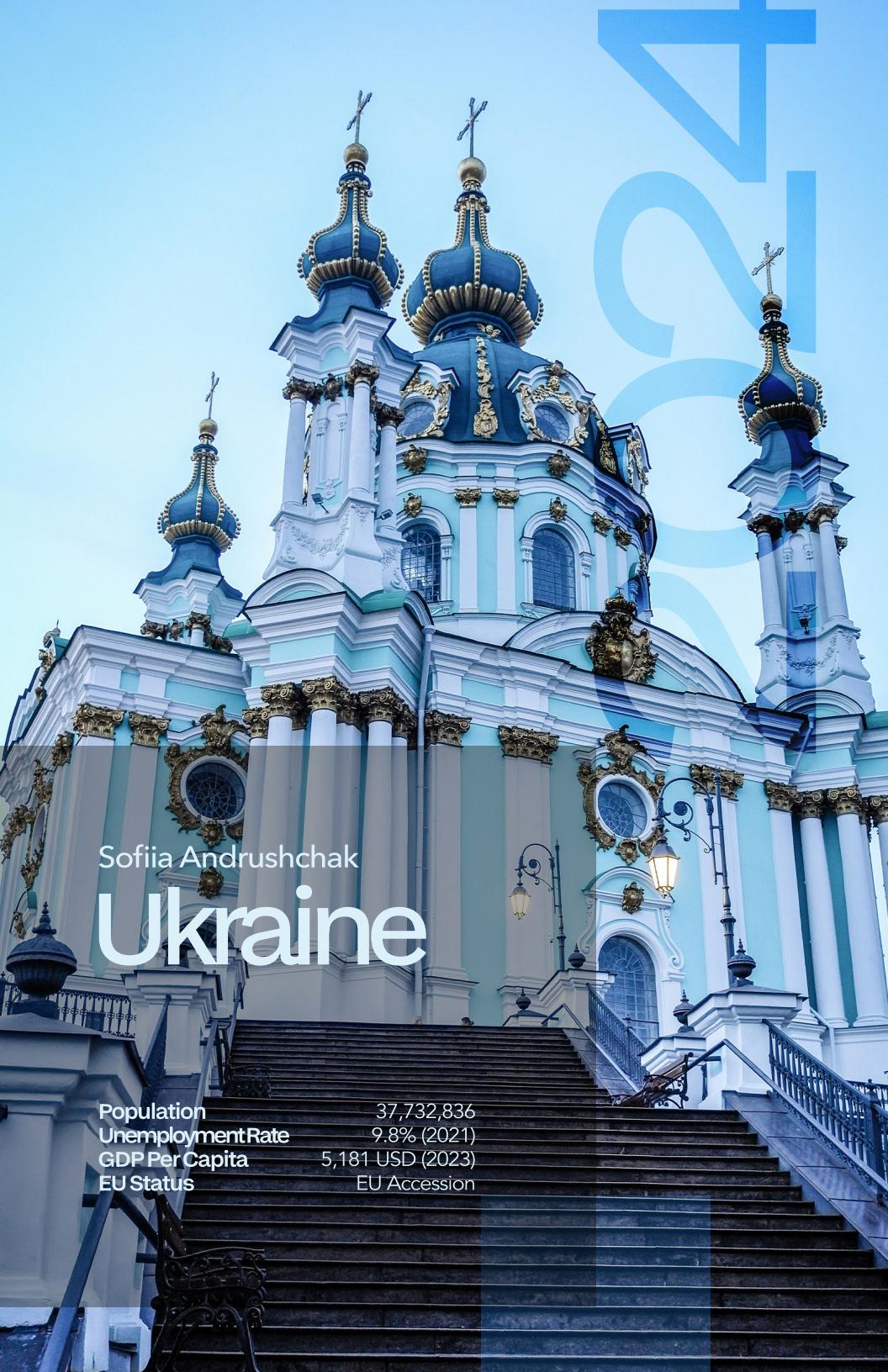
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## Introduction

The year 2024 was the eleventh year since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2014, and the third year of the full-scale invasion in February 2022. It was a turning point for Ukraine, marked by resilience, adaptation, and transformation. Despite the economic demands imposed by the war, Ukraine expanded its domestic arms production, strengthening its defense industry and reducing its reliance on foreign supplies. The country also made significant progress in energy independence, rebuilding infrastructure damaged by Russian attacks and accelerating the transition to renewable power sources. Ukrainian culture has flourished, with literature, film, and media reinforcing national identity and resistance. Meanwhile, the government ramped up efforts to counter Russian disinformation and tighten cybersecurity. Socially, volunteer networks and grassroots organizations continued to play a crucial role in supporting the war effort and reinforcing national unity. These developments, alongside continued international support, underscored Ukraine's determination to secure its future on its own terms.

## Military: Kursk Offensive

On August 6, 2024, Ukraine launched an incursion into Kursk Oblast of the Russian Federation, which took everyone, including Ukraine's allies, by surprise. The West widely supported the offensive. The European Commission's spokesperson Peter Stano said, "We think that Ukraine is fighting a legitimate defensive war against an illegal aggression." At the same time, the operation has boosted the morale of the Ukrainians. As of February 2025, Ukraine still holds land in Kursk. There are various reasons why Ukraine did this; among them are military, diplomatic, and strategic reasons. This incursion shows to the EU, NATO, and the rest of the world that Russia is not strong enough to defend its borders and, at the same time, proves Ukraine's capability, strength, and winning potential. It also demonstrates that the threat of Russian 'red lines,' including nuclear ones, is not backed by corresponding action from the Russian Federation. Ukrainian control over Kursk Oblast would create a buffer zone, enhancing the security of the neighboring Sumy Oblast. In addition, Ukrainian control of even part of the Kursk region can prove useful in negotiations. This strengthens

Ukraine's hand in negotiations and allows it to switch Kursk for Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories.

## Diplomatic: EU opened accession negotiations with Ukraine

The European Union opened accession negotiations with Ukraine on June 25th, 2024. The accession process has now formally begun after Ukraine applied for EU membership in February of 2022. EU accession is strongly supported in Ukraine, especially following the full-scale invasion, with polls showing 88% of Ukrainians in favor of membership as of late 2024. The process remains lengthy, and no official dates have been publicly set. Hopes for Ukraine to join by or before 2030 have been publicly expressed by EU officials, including Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission. However, some Northern European countries believe the process should move even faster. To join the European Union, Ukraine must complete various reforms, which are helped and expedited by initiatives such as the "Growth Plan" and the "Ukraine Plan". The EU evaluates candidate countries based on three main criteria: political, economic, and legislative-administrative. Politically, a country

must have stable institutions that uphold democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and minority rights. Economic readiness requires a functioning market economy, while legislative and administrative criteria involve aligning national laws with EU standards. Additionally, good relations with neighboring non-EU and EU countries, as well as public support for EU membership, are important factors. The European Commission praised and emphasized Ukraine's progress on the reforms, including ones related to anti-corruption measures and the judiciary. The beginning of the accession process solidifies the EU member countries' interest in a sovereign, peaceful, and prosperous Ukraine.

## Economic: Frozen Russian assets and their profits

At the beginning of the full-scale invasion, many Russian assets in the European Union, the United States, and Canada were frozen as a form of sanctions on the Russian Federation. The EU holds around two-thirds of the total \$300bn in Russian frozen assets. On May 21, 2024, the EU announced that it approved the use of the profits from the frozen assets — though not the assets themselves — to support Ukraine,

including military aid. For instance, around 90% of the proceeds were intended as reimbursement for EU members who delivered military equipment to Ukraine. In late October 2024, the EU approved an up to €35 billion loan to Ukraine, which is to be repaid with future revenues from the frozen assets. Karin Karlsbro, a member of the European Parliament, said, "Russia must pay for attacking Ukrainians and brutally destroying the country's infrastructure, cities, villages, and homes." In this way, the money serves as a form of reparations paid by the Russian Federation. However, in 2024, no official plan was made to confiscate the frozen Russian assets. This is due to fears of the European Union that a move such as this could destabilize the global financial system. As noted in a report by the New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy, while there is no legal precedent, there are legal avenues to transfer significant portions of these assets — such as those belonging to Russian oligarchs — if not all of them, to Ukraine. This is primarily because Russia is waging an illegal, genocidal war against Ukraine. In addition, establishing a new precedent could serve as a deterrent to future violent conflicts.

## Elections: No Elections for Ukraine in 2024

Ukraine was supposed to hold presidential elections in the spring of 2024. However, they were postponed, likely until Ukrainian victory. According to the Ukrainian Constitution, elections cannot be held during martial law. If Ukraine were to hold elections during the hot phase of the war or even active hostilities with the Russian Federation, many problems would occur. Ukrainian soldiers at the front lines or being held as prisoners of war would not be able to come home to vote. Neither could the almost 7 million refugees that left the country, nor the 4 million displaced inside the country, some of which have not yet settled permanently. Another group of people unable to vote are the people in Ukrainian territories occupied by the Russian Federation. As of May 2024, this constituted 18% of all Ukrainian territory. As President Zelenskyi said in his press conference on February 23, 2025, approximately half of Ukrainians cannot vote, and therefore an election cannot be legitimate. Another important element is Russian interference in the electoral processes through hacking, agitation, and other forms of hybrid warfare, not

only in Ukraine but elsewhere. Thus, elections could not be held online since they would be easily susceptible to hacking. Holding in-person elections and posting locations where to vote could create targets for the Russians to bomb, as they are eager to bomb civilians. According to the Kyiv Independent, 69% of Ukrainians believed Volodymyr Zelenskyi should remain in office until the end of martial law in early 2024. Meanwhile, the EU, spoken for by the EU's top diplomat Kaja Kallas, as well as the opposition of Zelenskyi (Petro Poroshenko and Yuliia Tymoshenko) have openly supported him as the legitimate president of Ukraine to be in power until elections could be held safely. Ukraine, therefore, cannot hold elections while it is still fighting a war, and there is a legitimate reason for martial law.

## Year in Review

The year 2024 was pivotal for Ukraine, marked by military advancements, diplomatic milestones, economic developments, and political stability under martial law. The Kursk offensive demonstrated Ukraine's strength, exposing Russian vulnerabilities and enhancing its negotiating position.

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Eno Ma

# United Kingdom

Population	68,459,055
Unemployment Rate	4.3% (Aug–Oct)
GDP Per Capita	48,867 USD
EU Status	1973–Jan 31 2020

## UNITED KINGDOM

Eno Ma

### Introduction

The United Kingdom experienced a subdued 2024, characterised by a fragile economic recovery, a persistent cost-of-living crisis, and the Labour Party's election victory. The election outcomes are explored in this paper via two subsets of the Labour government's policy: climate change and immigration.

### Inflation & Cost of Living

In 2024, the UK's economy was riddled with inflation and cost-of-living challenges. Reflecting trends from the pandemic, high prices remained most pronounced in fuel, clothing, and services. While the Consumer Prices Index rose by 2.6% between January and November, wage growth managed to outpace inflation in some sectors, mitigating financial pressures for certain workers. However, this economic momentum remained uneven; GDP rebounded from a mild recession early in the year and contracted by 0.1% in October. The downturn was attributed to rising employer national insurance contributions and an increased minimum wage.

Affordability remained a pressing issue, with housing and energy costs surging. In December

2024, the Office for National Statistics labelled homeownership "unaffordable" across all income deciles in London as energy bills continued to climb, exacerbating financial strain. Additionally, labour market concerns persisted: one in five young adults cited mental health conditions as a barrier to career advancement. These factors collectively suggest that while the UK avoided a deep economic downturn, structural affordability and cost-of-living challenges persist as key policy concerns moving forward. Currently, the Bank of England projects inflation to peak at 2.8% by late 2025 before easing.

### General Election

On July 4, 2024, the Labour Party won a landslide election, securing 412 seats—211 more than in the previous 2019 election. With the Conservatives holding onto a diminutive 121 seats, Labour swiftly formed a majority government for the first time in 14 years, electing Keir Starmer to the prime ministership.

Prime Minister Keir Starmer ran on a five-pronged manifesto, with priorities on fixing the economy and reducing the cost of living. He pledged to raise the UK's growth rate to the

highest across G7 countries by the end of Labour's first term, an ambitious outlook challenged by structural realities; currently, the UK's output per worker is below all G7 nations except Japan. Besides the economy, the Prime Minister's priorities included revitalising the UK's clean energy sector, reforming the National Health Service (NHS), strengthening the criminal justice system, and increasing access to education.

On October 30, 2024, the Labour government published its Autumn Budget, marking a shift in government spending by expanding on national welfare schemes under the previous administration. The Labour cabinet deemed a yearly 2% increase in public spending necessary to address critical funding shortfalls. Through this, the government sought to enhance public services, such as reducing NHS wait times and offering better health and disability benefits. Nevertheless, maintaining a balanced national budget and reducing debt remained central in the broader spending strategy.

In a November 2024 press release, the Labour government reaffirmed its commitment to delivering cleaner and more affordable heating for homes. To achieve this, it set a target of 1.5

million new homes in England over five years and introduced the Warm Homes Plan—a £7,500 grant scheme aimed at helping households in England and Wales transition from boilers to energy-efficient heating systems.

Beyond the domestic sphere, the new administration signalled a turning point in UK-EU relations. In December 2024, Chancellor Rachel Reeves met in Brussels to negotiate a new trade relationship with the bloc. While stopping short of rejoining the European Union, Labour recentered its foreign policy around "dynamic alignment"—maintaining regulatory consistency with EU laws in areas such as trade, Northern Ireland, and other standards. By working to reduce export barriers and regulatory hurdles, Labour's approach represents a departure from its predecessor, aiming to strengthen economic ties with the EU.

### Climate Policy

At COP29, Prime Minister Keir Starmer announced an 81% emissions reduction target by 2035, raising the ambition from the 78% goal set under the Sunak administration. This renewed commitment coincided with the UK's ongoing £11.6 billion climate

finance plan, extending until March 2026. In Azerbaijan, the Prime Minister reaffirmed the UK's broader commitments to decarbonise national electricity by 2030, with key initiatives including a £1 billion investment in renewable wind job creation and a push for public-private partnerships in energy infrastructure, beginning with wind and solar power. Amongst other legislation, two fiscal tools emerged in 2024: The Green Prosperity Plan—a £4.7 billion initiative supporting the renewable energy transition—and the Great British Energy Corporation—designed to co-invest and expand clean energy production.

Despite the clear signal of ambition, the UK Climate Change Committee (CCC) declared these actions "worryingly slow" in a June report, citing a lack of urgency and the sustained role of oil and gas as sources of power. The UK's inadequate heating infrastructure epitomised the nation's reliance on fossil fuels; progress towards installing 600,000 electric heat pumps yearly by 2028 had stalled for fear of public backlash. The government remained affixed to minimising heating and insulation costs for the poorest households, often reliant on fossil fuels, posing a significant challenge to the green energy transition. At a similar

crossroads was the uncertainty facing supposed job creation in low-carbon sectors. As reported by the CCC, to ensure the energy transition is "just"—meaning no workers are unaccounted for—the government must follow policies to muster "the availability of skilled workers in the right place at the right time."

Labour's new environmental targets, despite alluring, require specificity and long-term strategy, putting the threats of climate change at the fore and conceivably above their short-term costs. The government placed climate change at the forefront of its policy agenda, yet several key areas remained underdeveloped in 2024. For instance, despite a 10% sustainable aviation fuel target by 2030, announced in April 2024, no concrete strategy for reducing vehicular emissions was devised. As proposed by the CCC, solutions lie at the critical juncture of managing demand and reining in market-driven expansion.

### Immigration

Efforts to reduce net migration remained a defining feature of UK immigration policy in 2024, with a continued focus on curbing small boat crossings. In 2024, almost 37,000 people

crossed the English Channel in small boats—a decrease from 46,000 in 2022. These crossings continued to place immense strain on the immigration system and remain a focal point of public concern, contributing to a sharp rise in asylum applications through the decade. In September 2024, the figure of asylum seekers in the UK was around 99,700, vastly overrepresented by migrants from the Middle East. Notably, the Labour government dismantled the costly Rwanda Scheme introduced under the Conservatives, which had planned to relocate asylum seekers to Rwanda and other “third countries.” Instead, Prime Minister Starmer redirected funding and resources toward combating smuggling networks through counter-terrorism measures.

While asylum applications rose, overall immigration fell by roughly 20% between 2023 and 2024. From January to June 2024, 906,000 people migrated to the UK, during which immigration laws were tightened. On 11 April 2024, the required baseline salary increased by nearly 50%, from £26,200 to £38,700 minimum, representing a stricter requirement for visa applicants via the points-based system (PBS). In 2022, then-Home Secretary James Cleverly projected that this policy would bar

an estimated 300,000 applicants from applying for visas.

Meanwhile, changes to entry schemes for family and work visas took effect in the spring of 2024, backed by both Conservative and Labour ministers with the intent to curb immigration. The list of eligible jobs for the Skilled Worker visa was renamed to the Immigration Salary List and shortened. Provisions allowing social care workers to bring dependents on their visa were removed, and the “going rate” minimum salary for jobs in key sectors was raised in April. However, while immigration was a dominant policy concern, labour shortages were largely overlooked, particularly in social care, where vacancies stood at approximately 150,000 jobs. These restrictive measures risked cutting off a vital labour stream for healthcare, social work, and other essential sectors.

While immigration policy debates continued to dominate the political landscape, the issue took on a more volatile dimension in the summer of 2024. Between 30 July and 7 August, a wave of anti-immigration protests and riotsswept UK cities and towns, catalysed by misinformation on online channels and social media. Riots occurred in the context of rising living costs, long-standing social tensions, and

dissatisfaction with government policies. The broader challenge for policymakers remains: striking a balance between immigration control, social cohesion, and public order, particularly amidst ongoing economic uncertainty.

### Year in Review

The United Kingdom in 2024 was marked by political transition, economic fragility, and policy divides. Labour's return to power suggested a pivot from austerity-era conservatism, foregrounding new public investments, climate ambition, and a recalibrated approach to immigration. Yet, implementation lagged behind rhetoric. While inflation eased modestly, cost-of-living pressures persisted, particularly in housing and energy. Climate policy regained momentum, with renewed emissions targets and investment in clean energy, though delivery gaps and structural dependencies on fossil fuels remain unresolved. Immigration reform was sweeping, but its restrictive design may compound labour shortages and stir public unrest. Taken together, the year underscored a tension between ambitious policymaking and the structural, political, and social constraints, which continue

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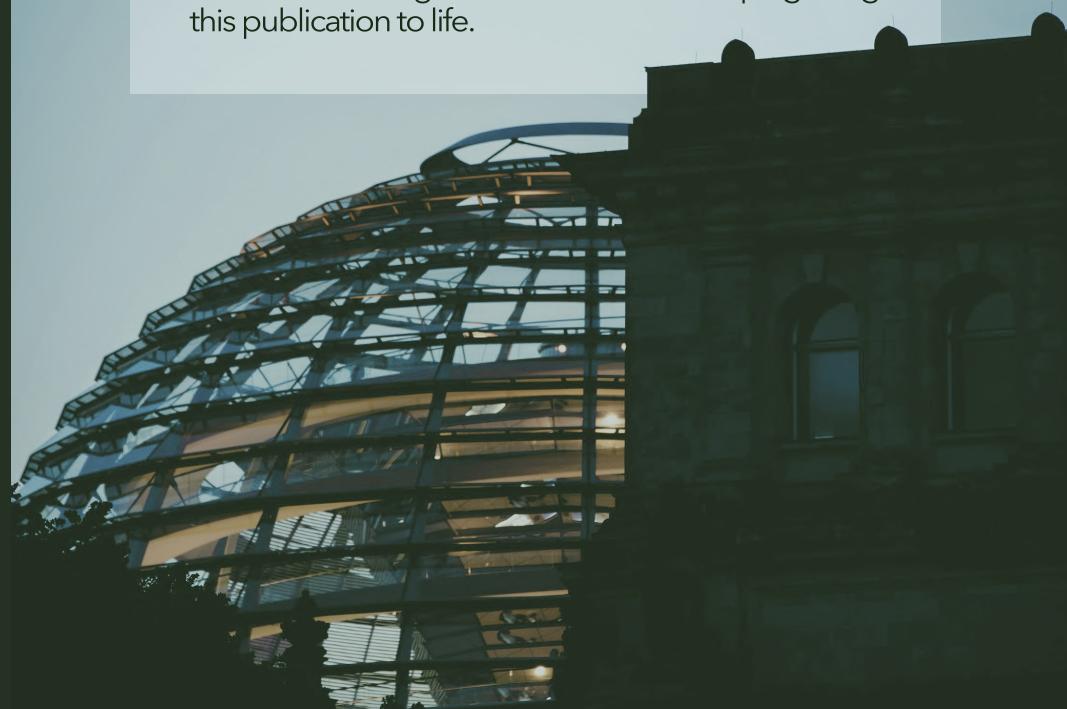
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