

Impending referendum on political direction

Between 6 and 9 June 2024, the citizens of the 27 EU Member States will be called upon to elect the European Parliament for a new five-year term. In the past, European elections have often been dominated by national issues and served as a means of “political reckoning” with the incumbent government.

This year is different. The 2024 European elections are a referendum on political direction at a time of ongoing crises that affect all EU Member States and have created uncertainty among voters across borders. The EU’s role in addressing these crises is under increasing scrutiny—not without consequences.

Eurosceptic forces are gaining ground in many EU countries. Recent polls show that this is likely to be reflected in the election results. If the forecasts are correct, the majority in the European Parliament will change significantly from June.

The centre-left parties, especially the Greens, could perform worse than ever before, while the two far-right parties are expected to make significant gains. This would make it even more difficult to reach a consensus between the political groups—an already formidable task. Such an upheaval could be all the more momentous as the European Union faces significant external and internal challenges that will need to be addressed in the coming years. Externally, these include the impact of climate change, Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine and the management of growing migration. Internally, the EU must find answers to the pressing questions of whether there will be any institutional reforms in the EU in the near future and what economic and sociopolitical course the EU should take in the future. In addition, there are continuing enormous tasks associated with the digital transformation.

In any case, the election result will have an impact on the policies of the European Commission, which depends on majorities in the European Parliament to push through its legislative proposals. The man-

date of the European Commission under the leadership of Ursula von der Leyen ends with the current legislative period of the European Parliament. It remains to be seen which top candidates the parties will put forward. Although not formally enshrined in the EU treaties, the “Spitzenkandidaten” principle applies, according to which the candidate from the political group that wins the most seats in the European Parliament becomes President of the Commission. Observers in Brussels are speculating that Ursula von der Leyen will remain Commission President for another five years, representing the European People’s Party, which is leading in the polls.

Notwithstanding these major political challenges, which have been the focus of media attention, it should be noted that the importance of the European Union for the dental profession has continued to grow significantly over the past five years since the last European elections. Even today, many issues of importance to the dental profession are no longer decided at the national level, but in Brussels and Strasbourg. EU legislation such as the Medical Devices Regulation, the emerging European Health Data Space, the Patients’ Rights Directive or the EU Mercury Regulation with its provisions on the use of dental amalgam directly affect the day-to-day running of dental practices. The self-regulation of dentists is also significantly affected by the requirements of the EU internal market, such as the Directive on a mandatory proportionality test prior

to the adoption of any new professional law. Although EU Member States are formally responsible for the organisation and financing of their health systems under Article 168 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, the COVID-19 pandemic has catapulted the topic of health—a niche issue not so long ago—to the centre of attention in Brussels.

Numerous laws have been passed at EU level in recent years under the banner of the Health Union. Moreover, the political call for a transfer of more health policy competences from the national to the EU level cannot be ignored. This is clearly illustrated by the results of the Conference on the Future of Europe, which ended in 2022 and is seen as a blueprint for future changes to the EU Treaties. For example, the conference participants called for the establishment of common minimum standards for healthcare at the EU level.

In recent months, the political parties have adopted their election programmes for the European elections. All parties have included their own chapters with health policy demands, some of which differ. Most of the parties are in favour of further developing existing EU policy in the area of health and are building on existing issues. While the parties on the more left-wing spectrum can envisage more EU competences in health policy—including the adoption of common minimum standards of care—this tends to be rejected by the more right-wing parties.

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