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**A YEAR OF ELECTIONS
WHERE MIGRATION TOPS
THE AGENDA**

Migration Research Institute

**Analysis
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A YEAR OF ELECTIONS WHERE MIGRATION TOPS THE AGENDA

Migration has become one of the most important social and political issues in the developed world. In 2024, multiple elections will be held with immigration one of the most prominent themes in the campaigns. In addition, not only the parties and politicians on the far right, but also the mainstream right and, in some places, the left, are now calling for tighter controls.

INTRODUCTION

On 10 March, the super year of elections kicks off in the Western world. It starts with Portugal, followed by elections in Belgium, Croatia, Austria, Georgia, the UK, the US and Austria, and then the 27-nation European Parliament elections. A common thread running through all the political contests is that migration will be a crucial issue everywhere. Among the 2024 elections in the Western world, the only countries where migration is not a major campaign issue are Lithuania and Iceland whose geographical locations make them less affected by the issue. This continues a trend that started in the Netherlands in 2023, where social discontent over rising legal and illegal immigration led to the majority of votes being won by forces critical of migration.

But what might 2024 bring? Can anti-immigration political forces in Europe and North America gain ground? The analysis by Migration Research Institute explores this question.

PORTUGAL (MARCH 10)

The mandate of the Socialist Party-led Portuguese government was originally due to expire in 2026, but Prime Minister António Costa was forced to resign in November 2023 after he was detained by the authorities on suspicion of corruption. Early parliamentary elections were therefore called for 10 March, with 19 parties competing for the votes.

There are 980,000 non-citizen immigrants in Portugal, 80% of whom come from outside the European Union. In 2023 alone, 150,000 people applied for residence, of which 50,000

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were Ukrainian citizens. Brazilians make up half of the foreign population with 400,000 people. For them, it is relatively easy to obtain visas due to the shared language and cultural roots.¹ The number of illegal immigrants is estimated at 300,000.² Despite the geographical proximity, the number of North and Sub-Saharan Africans is low, with 6,000 of the former and 10,000 of the latter living in Portugal.³

Last September, the socialist government pledged to include Portugal in the EU solidarity mechanism and to take in asylum seekers who landed on the Italian island of Lampedusa.⁴ However, high immigration levels pushed up support for the anti-migration Chega from 7.3% in 2019 to 21% today. The party, led by André Ventura, would, among other measures, adjudicate asylum applications abroad, following the British model, and only grant social benefits to foreigners who have been working for five years.⁵ Chega could become a governing force in coalition with the liberal-conservative Social Democratic Party, which has been in opposition for eight years, and thus be able to enforce its tougher migration policy.

BELGIUM (JUNE 9)

Although Belgium has been an immigration destination for half a century, the public mood has deteriorated dramatically in the last few years, with 38,000 asylum seekers arriving in 2022 (a 40% increase compared to 2021) and 65,000 Ukrainian citizens.⁶

Meanwhile, deportations are proceeding very slowly, with fewer than 5,500 undocumented foreigners sent back in 2023, barely half of the number from a decade earlier.⁷ There was also widespread outrage when a Tunisian man staying in Belgium illegally murdered Swedish football fans in October.

The seven-party Liberal–Socialist–Green coalition led by Alexander De Croo has already taken small steps towards restrictions. Since August last year, single male asylum seekers have not been accepted in state-run accommodation. The government also unveiled a new immigration law in January to replace the 1980 legislation. It would increase police powers to identify people who are in Belgium illegally, and it would close previous legal loopholes.

¹ THE PORTUGAL NEWS 2023.

² SEF 2022.

³ JOSHUA PROJECT 2023.

⁴ EURACTIV 2023a.

⁵ CHEGA 2023.

⁶ EMN 2023.

⁷ SERVICE PUBLIC FÉDÉRAL INTÉRIEUR 2023.

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For example, parents whose asylum applications are rejected would no longer be able to reapply on behalf of their children.⁸

However, citizens feel that this is not enough: 71% of Belgians would like to see a radical tightening of the asylum procedure.⁹ It is no coincidence that the strongly anti-immigration Flemish Interest has increased its popularity to 25%, making it the strongest party in Belgium.¹⁰

The successor party to the far-right Flemish Bloc has a long history of popularity ranging from 7-13%, but since the 2015 migration crisis it has remained stable at over 20%.

As a result of its rhetoric and growing support, the center-right N-VA has already taken an anti-immigration stance, and in 2019 the two parties held coalition talks. Although the N-VA then formed a coalition government without the Flemish Interest, this year's elections could force the two right-wing parties into an alliance. However, they are still far from being in government. Although they have a combined support of 45%, they are less likely to find a third partner to win a majority in the Flemish parliament. At the national level, they are even less likely to do so, as the left typically wins the majority of votes in Wallonia. However, the strengthening of the Flemish Interest will make the issue of migration even more prominent in the future, besides which the question of increasing Flemish autonomy could also become an issue.

With a government like the current one in Belgium, radical changes in migration policy are unlikely. It is more likely that the country will tie its fate to the European Union (in this area too) and try to promote the implementation of the common pact on migration.

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS (JUNE 6–9)

European citizens are divided into two major “political tribes”, according to a European Council on Foreign Relations poll conducted in June 2023. One is made up of those who are concerned about the fate of the human race and climate change, and the other is made up of those who fear for their nation's cultural identity in the face of the consequences of migration. These two themes are likely to be the most important determinants of the outcome of the European Parliament elections.¹¹

The European Council on Foreign Relations predicts that the European Parliament elections will see a right-wing surge, while the center-left and Green parties will lose

⁸ THE BRUSSELS TIMES 2024.

⁹ EURACTIV 2023b.

¹⁰ POLITICO 2024a.

¹¹ EURONEWS 2024.

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support.¹² Anti-immigration parties are in first place in Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, France, the Netherlands, Hungary, Poland, Italy, Slovakia and the Netherlands, while they are in second and third place in Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Sweden and Romania.¹³ The result could bring about a significant change in many EU policies, including attitudes to migration.

The European People's Party (EPP) will remain the strongest party family, but it will be somewhat weakened, and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) could lose seats. The two party families combined are expected to hold only 42% of the seats, down from the current 45%. Together with the third centrist party family, Renew Europe (RE), they could win 54% of seats instead of the current 60%.

The RE could be reduced from 101 seats to 86, while the number of seats for the Greens/EFA could be reduced from 71 to 61. The latter's loss could be even greater if the Italian Five Star Movement, with 13 expected MEPs, ends up in the independents.

Identity and Democracy (ID), on the other hand, can increase the number of seats by 40, possibly reaching 100. This could make the anti-immigration party family the third largest force and put it neck and neck with the equally anti-immigration European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR). However, if Fidesz (with its 14 expected MEPs) decides to join the ECR, the party family could become the third strongest group in the parliament. Together, the ID and ECR would win 25% of the seats, which would mean that for the first time in the history of the European Parliament, they could have more seats than the EPP or S&D.

All in all, the left-wing party families (S&D, G/EFA, and the Left in the European Parliament) will have only 33% of the seats instead of 35%, and even if they win the support of the RE, they will still have only 45% instead of 50%. The center-right EPP-RE-ECR bloc will win only 48% instead of 49%. Meanwhile, the far-right EPP-ECR-ID bloc will increase its support from 43% to 49%, with the radical right-wing parties that strengthen the independent camp as potential external allies. All this means that the EPP, not the RE, could now tip the balance between left and right.

AUSTRIA (JUNE 9)

The 2019 "Ibiza scandal" has severely damaged the popularity of the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), but by 2024, the Covid epidemic, the economic impact of the Russian-Ukrainian war and record-breaking migration will have the anti-immigration bloc back in full force.

¹² ECFR 2024.

¹³ POLITICO 2024B.

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In 2022, 112,000 asylum applications were filed in the country, making Austria with its 9 million inhabitants place fourth in Europe.¹⁴ Although in 2023 the number was “only” 58,000, social tensions have not subsided, and the FPÖ is now the strongest political force with 27% of the vote.¹⁵

Meanwhile, the governing Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP) has still not recovered from the departure of Sebastian Kurz in autumn 2021 and stands at 23%. On 24 January this year, Chancellor Karl Nehammer presented his election manifesto “Der Österreichplan” (The Austria Plan), which among other things announces reforms in the areas of migration and integration up to 2030.¹⁶

As in the UK, they would set up centers abroad to which asylum seekers who enter Austria illegally would be transferred while their applications are being processed (Vienna has already consulted London on this issue several times in 2023). Convicted criminals from third countries would serve their sentences in a third country, and the movement of rejected asylum seekers would be restricted, preventing them from hiding to avoid deportation. As in Denmark, the valuables of illegal entrants would be confiscated and used to cover costs, while those without residence permits would receive only the state contributions they need to survive, and those who return to their country of origin would be deprived of their right to asylum. The constitution would stipulate that Austrian is the “Leitkultur” (leading culture) in Austria, so that, among other things, there would be no change in designated holidays.

In Austria, the strengthening of the right will certainly lead to a tightening of immigration and integration policies after the elections.

CROATIA (SEPTEMBER 22)

In 2023, Croatia would receive more than 60,000 irregular migrants from Bosnia and Herzegovina, 40% more than in 2022.¹⁷ 70% of Croats are concerned about the mass influx of foreigners, and half of them believe that migrants are a threat to Croatian culture and way of life, while only 23.6% would support their admission.¹⁸ Migration has therefore become a major issue in the election campaign. The largest governing party, the center-right HDZ, promises to protect the country. However, they see the European Union’s

¹⁴ BUNDESMINISTERIUM INNERES 2023.

¹⁵ POLITICO 2024C.

¹⁶ DER ÖSTERREICHPLAN 2024.

¹⁷ EURACTIV 2024.

¹⁸ JUTARNIJ 2023.

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migration pact as the means to do so.¹⁹ The main opposition parties, the left-wing Socijaldemokrati and the SDP, also take a similar position.

GEORGIA (OCTOBER 26)

In the run-up to the parliamentary elections in Georgia, migration has become the subject of political debate for very specific reasons. In the wake of the Russo-Ukrainian war, 148,000 Russian citizens arrived in the Caucasus country in 2022, and more than 160,000 in 2023. At the same time, 21,000 companies were registered by Russian citizens.²⁰ Their presence is a particularly sensitive issue, since in 2008 Georgia lost a five-day war to Moscow which still controls one fifth of its territory. According to a survey, 79% of citizens see the arrival of Russians as a risk and would impose visa requirements on them.²¹

The ruling Georgian Dream, however, does not see people from Russia as a risk, and its leader Irakli Kobakhidze has proposed tightening laws that criminalize discrimination.²² The opposition has responded by organizing demonstrations to put pressure on the government. The leader of the Lelo party, Mamuka Khazaradze, is calling for the introduction of a visa requirement for Russians and restrictions on their access to land and property. Even more radical voices are being raised by Mikheil Saakashvili, who presided over the 2008 war and now leads the strongest opposition party, UNM, and would force Russians to sell their property and leave the country within a year.

UNITED STATES (NOVEMBER 5)

Migration has become one of the hottest topics in the US presidential elections. Following the inauguration of the Biden administration on 20 January 2021, all but one of the Trump administration's decrees aiding the fight against irregular migration was repealed. Irregular migrants saw this as an open invitation. Under Joe Biden's presidency, already more than 9 million people have entered the US illegally. In fiscal year 2022, 2.2 million illegal border crossers were recorded at the southern border, 100,000 of whom were transported to Washington, Los Angeles and New York. December 2023 was the worst month ever for illegal border crossing, with 371,000 cases.²³ Migrants are now pouring to the US southern – and partly northern – border not only from the traditional sending countries of Mexico and the so-called Northern Triangle (Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador), but from all over

¹⁹ VIJESTI 2024.

²⁰ TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL 2023.

²¹ IRI 2023.

²² IPN 2022.

²³ MIGRÁCIÓKUTATÓ INTÉZET 2024A.

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the world. This has created a tense situation between the central government and the leadership of the southern states.²⁴ Donald Trump campaigned on tightening border controls before his election in 2016 and is doing so again in the wake of the current situation. Trump, who is still running for the Republican nomination, currently leads Joe Biden by 6 percentage points.²⁵

UNITED KINGDOM (DECEMBER 12)

Rishi Sunak was elected Prime Minister in 2022 partly on the promise of tightening migration, with one of his main promises being to stop boats arriving irregularly from France.²⁶ This was partially successful, with the tightening of controls in 2023 reducing the number of illegal arrivals in the Channel by 36% compared to the previous year, but still nearly 30,000 people entered the island nation through this route.²⁷

The government has had some partial successes, such as speeding up the processing of pending asylum applications.²⁸ However, no real breakthrough has been achieved, as first the UK Supreme Court and then the European Court of Human Rights have thrown up obstacles to the 'Rwanda Plan' which would see those arriving in the UK illegally via the Channel being transported to the African country.²⁹ Despite all the tightening, 745,000 migrants entered the country in 2023.³⁰ Most of them arrived legally, as the government only tightened the 2021 points-based visa regime late in December 2023.

The (partial) failure of the fight against migration is increasing pressure on Rishi Sunak within his party.³¹ Seven out of ten conservative voters who have defected from Sunak are dissatisfied with the effectiveness of his migration policy.³² Moreover, the social mood is not favorable for him. Surveys show that 32% of Britons see migration as a very negative issue, with 52% calling for tighter measures.³³ Another survey shows that 40% of citizens see migration as the biggest challenge facing the country.³⁴ As a result, not only the Conservatives but also Labour are now campaigning for tighter measures as the election approaches.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ THE HILL 2024.

²⁶ THE TELEGRAPH 2024A.

²⁷ INFOMIGRANTS 2024.

²⁸ THE GUARDIAN 2024.

²⁹ MIGRÁCIÓKUTATÓ INTÉZET 2024B.

³⁰ REUTERS 2023.

³¹ THE TELEGRAPH 2024B.

³² THE TELEGRAPH 2024C.

³³ THE MIGRATION OBSERVATORY 2023.

³⁴ YOUNGOV 2023.

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SUMMARY

Migration has become one of the most important social and political issues in the developed world. In the parliamentary and presidential elections in Western countries in 2024, anti-immigration forces are expected to prevail almost everywhere. In Portugal, the anti-immigration Chega could become part of the governing coalition. In Belgium, the Flemish Interest could win more votes than anyone else, although this is unlikely to be enough to form a government, and Belgium will continue to rely on the success of the common European pact on migration. In Austria, the anti-immigration Austrian Freedom Party and the currently governing Austrian People's Party that introduced restrictions in migration could win more than half of the seats in parliament.

In Croatia, there is a consensus on the need for tightening, but as in Belgium, the leading parties expect the migration pact to provide a solution. In the European elections, right-wing anti-immigration parties are expected to win a majority, and in the United States there is a strong chance of Donald Trump's victory and a return to a strict immigration policy. 2024 will therefore be an important year in which the Western world can again take significant steps towards closing its borders.

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