

**SPECIAL EDITION EUROPEAN  
ELECTIONS 2024**

**THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND ITS  
POLITICAL GROUPS**

## **Special Edition**

On 9 June 2024, elections to the European Parliament (“**EP**”) will take place in Portugal. These elections, which take place every five years, allow the citizens of the countries of the European Union (“**EU**” or “**Union**”) to elect the members – also known as “**MEPs**” – who will represent them in the EP during the 2024-2029 term.

Representing the interests of some 450 million Europeans, the 720 MEPs elected - 15 more than in previous elections - as legislators (and beyond) will have a major influence on EU policies.

Voting allows citizens to influence the direction of the Union's response to the global challenges it faces.

Given the undeniable importance of these elections, Cruz Vilaça Advogados will be publishing a series of newsletters on the subject until June to help understanding what the European elections are and what they represent.

This first newsletter looks at the role of the EP, its constitution, its functions and how the institution is organised.

## **The European Parliament: functions and representation**

The EP, as mentioned above, is one of the designated institutions of the Union (Article 13 of the Treaty on the European Union, “**TEU**”), exercising, together with the EU Council of Ministers, the legislative function. The EP is therefore responsible for assessing the Commission's proposals, discussing them in the specialised committees and, according to well-established voting rules, approving (or rejecting) those proposals, which will or will not become EU legal acts.

In addition to its legislative function, the EP also has the following competences:

It is the budgetary authority (Article 14(1) TEU) and is responsible for approving the EU's annual budget in accordance with a specific decision-making procedure. It also exercises political control over the other institutions and consultation functions.

It is also responsible for electing the President of the European Commission (Article 14(1) TEU) and the rest of the College of Commissioners.

The European Parliament functions as a representative assembly, welcoming leaders and dignitaries from all over the world on behalf of the EU at formal sittings and meetings with its members and officials.

Finally, it has the very important power to dismiss the European Commission by passing a motion of censure (something that, although present in the European Treaties since their creation in the 1950s, has never taken place).



Since Brexit, the European Parliament has been made up of 705 MEPs (out of a maximum of 750, in accordance with Article 14(2) of the TEU). In the next elections, in order to take account of demographic changes in some Member States, **720 MEPs will be elected**.

The representation of each Member State's citizens is based on the **principle of degressive proportionality**, which means that larger Member States, while electing more MEPs than smaller Member States, have a smaller representation as a percentage of the population. The minimum number of MEPs for each country is six and the maximum is 96 (Article 14(2) TEU). In the case of Portugal, 21 MEPs will be elected, as is already the case.

The rules laid down in the institution's Rules of Procedure apply to voting, and decisions can be taken by a simple majority, by a majority of members present, by a majority of elected members or by a qualified majority, depending on the issues in question.

Since 1979, **Members of the European Parliament have been elected by direct universal suffrage for a term of five years** (Article 14(3) TEU). The Parliament is the only EU institution directly elected by the citizens of the Union.

With some degree of analogy with what happens in the member states – without being exactly the same, of course – it is on the basis of the proposals of the European political parties that the leader of the EU executive (the President of the European Commission) is elected; this is the so-called "spitzenkandidat" system (which will be the subject of a separate newsletter), and the same happens, as mentioned above, with the other members of the College, and the new Commission as a whole, after demanding hearings with each of the candidates, which often lead to their rejection and subsequent replacement.

### **What are the political groups in the European Parliament?**

Once elected, MEPs sit in political groups based on common convictions. In other words, they come together in these groups and not by nationality.

It is on the basis of this division into political groups that MEPs shape and decide on important political, economic and social issues that influence all aspects of life in the Union, also in defence of EU values (respect for human rights, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law, among others – Article 2 TEU).

Thus, although the European elections are contested by national political parties on the basis of elections held in each of the European countries, the majority of MEPs choose to join European, transnational political groups, depending on their political affinities. A few MEPs may be part of a group with no political identity of their own, known as "non-attached members".

It should also be noted that most of the political groups are also part of European political parties (i.e. they are basically an emanation of them). This distinction should always be borne in mind.

In addition, MEPs sit on one (or more) of the institution's twenty specialised committees, where all the issues are debated and the various pieces of legislation and positions are shaped, before being

presented to the plenary for debate and a final decision (they can always return to the committees). Each political group has a minimum of 23 MEPs from at least a quarter of EU countries (minimum of seven MEPs). In the current parliamentary term, there are seven political groups in the EP.

The Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats) ("**EPP**"), founded in 1976, is the largest and oldest of the political groups in the EP. It promotes centre-right policies, committed to building a fairer, more competitive and democratic Europe, as well as a self-confident Europe that recognises its unique history and heritage and defends its way of life. Over the decades, almost always in (tacit) alliance with the Socialist Group, it has been the fundamental pillar of the institution's functioning and the guarantor of its stability. This group includes the Portuguese PSD and CDS political parties. The German CDU is also part of this group, as are the French Republicans, among many other European parties.

The Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament ("**SDE**") stands for an inclusive European society, based on the principles of freedom, equality, solidarity, diversity and justice. It fights for social justice, jobs and growth, consumer rights, sustainable development, financial market reform and human rights. It is also one of the oldest groups in the institution, and includes most of the parties of the democratic left and centre-left, forming with the EPP a majority of stability and moderation that has resisted, at least until now, the more or less radical onslaughts that sometimes emerge in Europe. The MEPs elected by the PS in Portugal are part of this group. There are 26 national groups in the SDE.

The Renew Europe Group is a recently created liberal and pro-European political group, the successor to the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe. Its mission is to renew Europe and build a free and fair Europe. Situated somewhere in the political centre, its alliances have mainly been with the dominant parties. The Portuguese IL is part of this party, even though it does not currently have any elected MEPs. Member of this group are, for example, the Spanish Ciudadanos, the French Renaissance (of Macron) and the Irish Fianna Fáil Party.

The Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance has reunited environmental parties in the EP since 1984. This group believes that Europe represents a common home and a common future. It defends environmental protection, equal opportunities, social justice and an open, democratic Europe in which citizens participate in politics and are not supplanted by corporate interests. Its vocation has led this group to ally with the most left-wing political groups, always maintaining a very strong ecological and cause-based discourse. Portugal has a deputy in this group. It includes parties such as the Republican Left of Catalonia and Germany's Die Grünen.

The European Conservatives and Reformists Group ("**ECR**") states that the EU has a role to play in the 21st century, but that it should focus on cooperation between its Member States and on finding practical solutions to the problems and challenges of the 2050s, not the 1950s. It is, as the name suggests, a conservative party, traditionally anti-federalist, which brings together some old traditional parties in this political space with new parties, mainly from Eastern Europe. Its ideology is that the EU must change because it has become "too centralised, too ambitious and too distant from ordinary people". The group includes parties such as the Polish PiS ("Law and Justice") or the Fratelli d'Italia, as well as the Spanish VOX. According to Viktor Orbán, leader of Fidesz (Hungary), that party will leave the EPP after the next elections to join the ECR.

The Identity and Democracy Group advocates an open, transparent, democratic and accountable cooperation between sovereign European states, rejecting the bureaucratisation of Europe and the creation of a single centralised European superstate. It includes the German AfD, Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National and Salvini's Lega. It is the group furthest to the right of the political spectrum in the EP and the one that the polls predict will grow the most in the next elections.

Finally, the Left group in the European Parliament ("GUE/NGL") is confederal, in the sense of respecting the diversity of identities and opinions of MEPs. The Group is committed to peace, solidarity, social justice, equality, democracy and human rights. There are four Portuguese MEPs in it, from two different parties, the PCP and the BE. It also includes parties and movements such as La France Insoumise and the Greek Syriza.

Portugal currently has seven MEPs from the EPP, nine from the SDE, one MEP from the Greens and four from the GUE/NGL.

The European Parliament is presided over by an MEP elected by his or her peers, whose role is to ensure compliance with the Rules of Procedure, supervise the various parliamentary activities and committees, represent the institutions abroad and in legal matters, and ultimately approve the European budget.

The President of the EP for the current term (two and a half years, ending with the elections in June) is Italian Roberta Metsola, a Maltese national.

