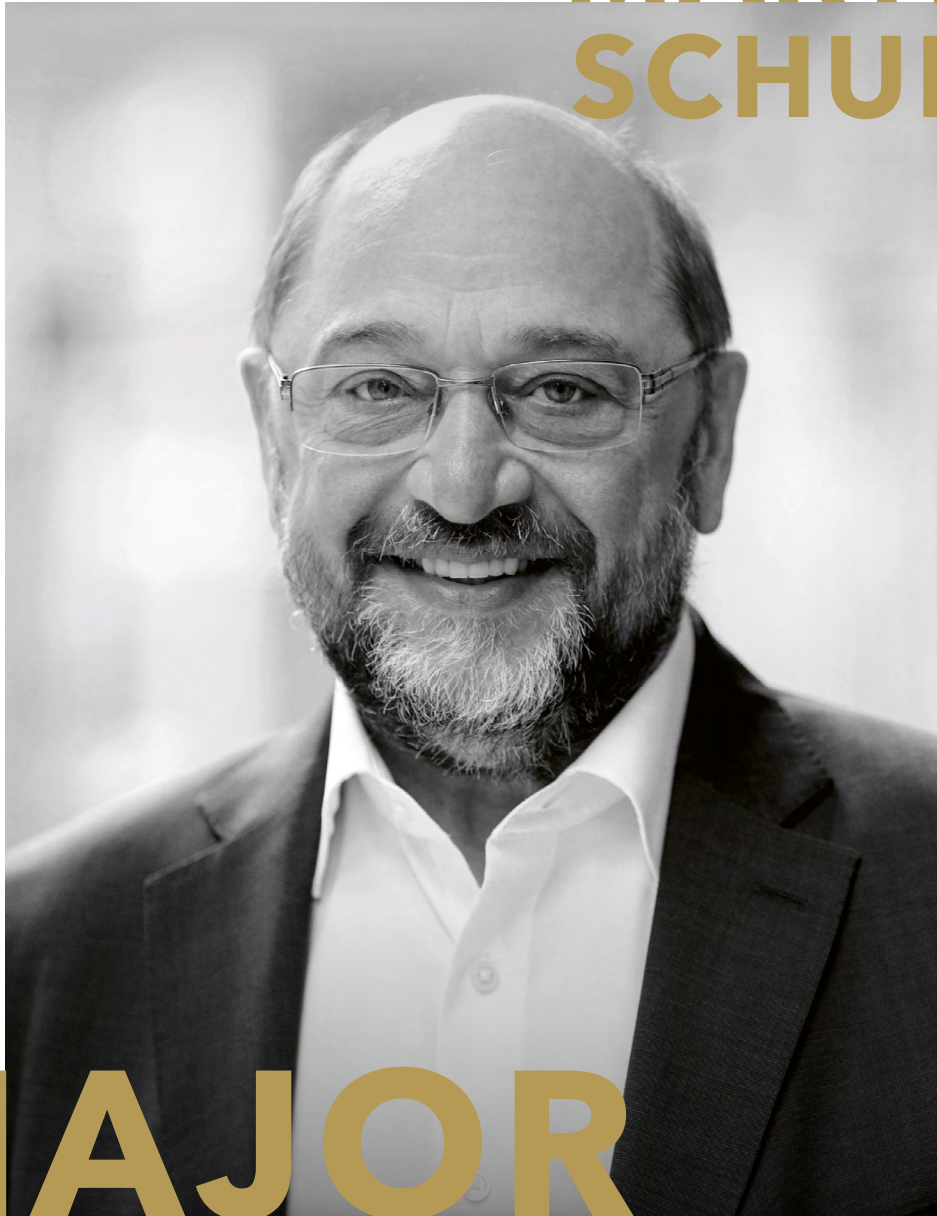


MARTIN SCHULZ



FORMER
PRESIDENT
OF THE
EUROPEAN
PARLIAMENT

MAJOR INTERVIEW

"We must continue to encourage citizen engagement in the democratic process."

As the next European elections approach, Confrontations Europe wished to gather the testimony and analysis of a key actor in European life over the past decades, Martin Schulz, former President of the European Parliament. The elections of 2024 represent a significant democratic moment in a period of profound transformations: economic, social, environmental, geopolitical... Martin Schulz outlines for us the major challenges and issues of the upcoming mandate.

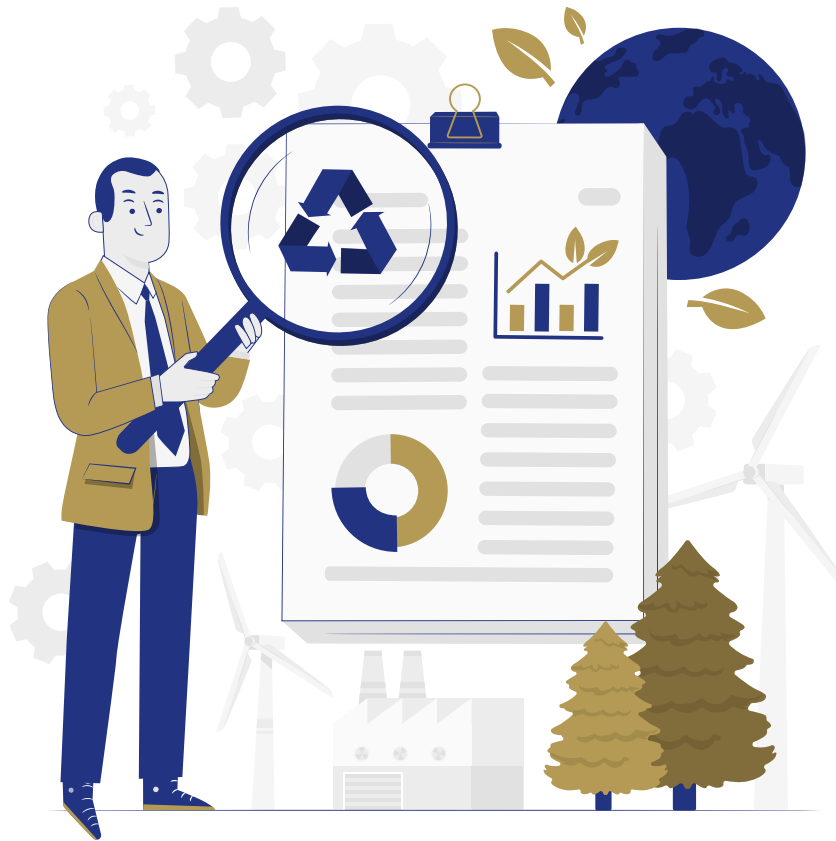
Confrontations Europe: *Confrontations Europe: "Europe will be forged in crises and will be the sum of the solutions brought to these crises," said Jean Monnet. This mandate has been marked by the global Covid-19 crisis and the conflict in Ukraine. Has Europe risen to the challenges posed? Or has the succession of crises shown our limits and risks, in the longer term, to stall the European machine?*

Martin Schulz: Jean Monnet was right to emphasize that Europe is forged in adversity. Indeed, this mandate has faced major challenges, notably the global Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian aggression in Ukraine. These events have tested the European Union's ability to act in a coordinated and effective manner. To some extent, we have succeeded in addressing these challenges by mobilizing resources and adopting emergency measures. We have seen examples of solidarity and cooperation, notably through the post-Covid recovery mech-

anism, but it is undeniable that gaps remain in our ability to react quickly and coherently. We must acknowledge that our response has not been perfect and that there are areas where we need to improve our cooperation and preparedness for the future. It is crucial that we learn from these experiences to strengthen our Union and better prepare for the challenges ahead. Crises reveal our weaknesses and compel us to overcome them to build a more resilient and cohesive Europe.

C. E.: *What have been, in your opinion, the flagship votes of the European Parliament during this mandate? How do they impact the lives of Europeans? Will their consequences be sufficient and visible enough to motivate and encourage Europeans to go to the polls? How to reignite European enthusiasm in those who doubt or turn away?*

M. S.: During this mandate, the European Parliament has adopted several significant measures to address the concerns of European citizens, which have a direct impact on the lives of Europeans. Among these, I would particularly highlight the adoption of the post-Covid recovery plan "Next Generation EU" and the Green Deal, which aims to lead the EU to carbon neutrality by 2050. These decisions aimed to stimulate economic recovery after a recessionary period linked to the pandemic and to set the European Union on the path to ecological transition. Ambitious environmental policies have been adopted during this mandate to combat climate change. Their impact on the daily lives of European citizens will be tangible, but it is essential that we communicate effectively about the concrete results of these actions and do more to make them socially acceptable. To reignite European enthusiasm in those who doubt or turn away, we must demonstrate ►



► that the European Union is able to address the challenges we face and providing concrete solutions that improve the lives of citizens. This requires clear and transparent communication about our achievements and ambitions, as well as enhanced commitment to democracy, solidarity, and cooperation within our Union.

C. E.: Participation in European elections increased for the first time in 2019. Will it also increase in 2024, or will we return to a declining turnout as has been the case since the first direct universal suffrage vote in 1979? What risks and challenges does this pose for our democracy in the short and medium term?

M. S.: Participation in European elections is a crucial indicator of the democratic vitality of our European Union. In 2019, we indeed observed a significant increase in turnout, which is a positive signal for our democracy. However, it is difficult to predict with certainty whether this trend will continue for the year 2024. We must continue to encourage citizen engagement in the democratic process. Several factors can influence voter turnout. On the one hand, European citizens are increasingly aware of the importance of European elections and their impact on their daily lives. Issues such as post-Covid economic recovery, the fight against

climate change, and the defense of fundamental rights are generating growing interest among voters. On the other hand, there are also challenges that could dampen participation. Trends in misinformation, political polarization, and the rise of populism could discourage some citizens from going to the polls. Additionally, perceptions of the effectiveness and legitimacy of European institutions can also influence the level of participation. To counter these risks, it is essential that we continue to raise awareness among citizens about the importance of their vote and strengthen trust in our democratic institutions. This requires clear communication about the stakes of European elections, as well as concrete measures to promote participation, such as information campaigns, public debates, and initiatives to encourage voter registration. The upcoming elections will be decisive for the future of Europe, and it is crucial that every voice counts in shaping our common future.

C. E.: How are the European elections approached in Germany? What importance is given to this election by political parties, the media, and citizens?

M. S.: In Germany, European elections have become an increasingly critical issue

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for political parties, the media, and citizens. European issues closely affect national interests, particularly in the areas of economy, security, and the environment. German voters are increasingly recognizing the importance of their voice in shaping European policies and are therefore more inclined to participate in European elections.

C. E.: The phenomena of misinformation and foreign interference in elections have intensified in recent years. Is there an increased risk for this European election, and are we ready to address it? What should we do better to guard against this scourge? Do we have the will and the means?

M. S.: Misinformation and foreign interference are serious threats to the integrity of European elections and democracy as a whole. However, I am confident that we have the means and the will to address these challenges, provided we act decisively and collectively. To effectively combat misinformation and interference, we must first strengthen the resilience of our democratic institutions and promote transparency and integrity in the electoral process. This involves measures such as raising awareness among citizens about disinformation techniques and collaborating with digital platforms to combat the spread of false information. Additionally, we must enhance cooperation between Member States and European institutions to exchange information, coordinate efforts, and develop common strategies to combat misinformation and foreign interference. This will require concerted action at the European level, as well as enhanced cooperation with our international partners. It is important to emphasize that the fight against misinformation should not be limited to the electoral period but should be a continuous and comprehensive effort to

promote a culture of truth and accountability in our society. This requires firm commitment from all stakeholders, including governments, the media, digital platforms, and civil society.

C. E.: There is a rise in populism across Europe, and polls predict an increase in the number of seats for far-right / radical right parties in the European Parliament. Is there a risk of institutional deadlock following the elections?

M. S.: We must fight against any democratic backsliding and stop the drift towards the far right in our country and in Europe. It is essential that European institutions remain firm in defending democratic values and the rule of law. This means, in particular, combating all forms of hate speech, discrimination, and xenophobia. Furthermore, it is important to promote constructive dialogue and strengthen cooperation between different political groups to overcome divisions and find solutions to the challenges we face as the European Union. It is true that the increased presence of populist and nationalist parties can complicate decision-making in the European Parliament due to ideological differences and often radical positions. However, our European Union is based on the principle of compromise and dialogue. Members of the European Parliament are elected to represent the interests of their constituents but also to work together in the common interest of the European Union. The rise of populism, observed in many European countries, challenges the fundamental values on which our European Union is based, such as respect for human rights, tolerance, and solidarity. Ultimately, while the rise of populism may pose a challenge to our European Union, I remain convinced that we have the resources and mechanisms necessary to address it. It is essential that we continue to promote a ►

► culture of compromise and mutual respect, as well as strengthen the democratic institutions of our European Union to ensure a stable and prosperous future for all European citizens.

C. E.: In your opinion, what will be the major challenges for the next mandate? Governance of Europe, European defense, environmental transition, economic and financial crises...?

M. S.: The upcoming challenges for the next mandate will require decisive action from European institutions and enhanced cooperation between Member States. Among the major challenges that will arise, I would highlight several key areas:

- **Governance of Europe:** Strengthening the governance of the European Union will be essential to ensure its effectiveness and democratic legitimacy. This includes reforming European institutions to make them more transparent, accountable, and democratic, as well as promoting greater citizen participation in decision-making.
- **European defense:** Faced with growing security challenges, it is imperative to strengthen European defense. This requires enhanced cooperation between Member States in defense, as well as strategic investments in research, development, and modernization of European military capabilities.
- **Climate transition:** The ecological crisis is one of the major challenges of our time, and the European Union must play a leadership role in the transition to a more sustainable and environmentally friendly economy. This involves implementing ambitious policies to combat climate change, promote renewable energy, and protect biodiversity.
- **Economic and financial crises:** The next mandate will also face economic and financial challenges. It will be essential to promote inclusive and sustainable economic recovery, as well as to strengthen the financial stability of the European Union to address any future crises.

Finally, I would emphasize that the European Union must continue to play an active role on the international stage, promoting multilateralism, respect for international law, and global solidarity. These challenges will require strong commitment and concerted action from all stakeholders, and I am confident

that the European Union is capable of addressing these challenges and building a better future for all European citizens.

C. E.: In order to validate the post-Covid recovery plan, it was decided to increase own resources. Will the upcoming elections be an opportunity to reconsider the subject in order to provide the European Union with a budget commensurate with its ambitions?

M. S.: It is clear that the question of the European budget is not simply a matter of numbers. It is also a question of political priorities and strategic choices. The European Union must invest in key areas such as ecological transition, research and innovation, social and regional cohesion, as well as promoting employment and economic growth. To do this, it is necessary to strike a balance between different priorities and to mobilize resources effectively and equitably. This may involve structural reforms of the European Union's financing system, as well as efforts to strengthen the fight against tax fraud and tax evasion at the European level. It is evident that deeper discussions will be necessary to ensure that the European Union has adequate means to achieve its objectives. The upcoming European elections could indeed be an opportunity to reopen this subject and debate ways to provide the European Union with a budget commensurate with its ambitions. The goal is to ensure that the European Union has the necessary means to achieve its ambitions and meet the expectations of European citizens. This will require open and inclusive dialogue among all stakeholders, including Member States, the European Parliament, and civil society. European citizens must be convinced that their vote contributes to shaping the future of Europe and ensuring its long-term prosperity.

C. E.: The candidate in the American elections, Donald Trump, said he would encourage Vladimir Putin to attack the "bad payers" of NATO. Will this push European institutions to deepen the theme of strategic autonomy, which has been at the heart of discussions at the end of this mandate?

M. S.: Donald Trump's statements regarding NATO and Vladimir Putin are concerning and highlight the need for the European Union to strengthen its strategic autonomy. European institutions must indeed deepen this crucial

theme that has been at the heart of discussions at the end of this mandate. It is essential that the European Union strengthens its ability to act autonomously on the international stage, ensuring its security and defending its common interests. This will require in-depth dialogue between Member States and enhanced cooperation in the field of defense and security.

C. E.: Finally, if you were to express three wishes for the next mandate to be a success and strengthen democracy in Europe and in the world, what would they be?

M. S.: Europe concerns us all. Our fundamental values are an international task for which we must fight in our own country. Respect for plurality of opinions and the duty of compromise are the recipe for democracy. We have reasons to be discouraged, but we do not have time to be discouraged. As a social democrat, I have no right to be discouraged. If I were to express three wishes for the next mandate to be a success and strengthen democracy in Europe and in the world, I would first wish for greater solidarity among the Member States of the European Union, based on mutual respect and cooperation. Secondly, I would like to see a more inclusive European Union that gives voice to citizens and is committed to promoting fundamental rights and social justice. Finally, I wish for Europe to strengthen its role on the international stage as a guarantor of peace, democracy, and universal values, collaborating closely with its partners around the world to address shared challenges. ■

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