BRUSSELS — In an increasingly vitriolic political climate, the last thing needed in the runup to the [*June European Union elections*](https://apnews.com/eu-election-2024) was an assassination attempt on one of the bloc’s most controversial figures.

As Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico lay recovering from Wednesday’s attack, the sheer violence of five shots targeted at a politician merely for doing his job immediately had a whole continent worried ahead of the June 6-9 polls.

Across the 27-nation EU, the political landscape is becoming increasingly polarized, with no holds barred between mainstream parties on the one hand and the bellicose populists and extremists on the other.

“It is shocking to see that someone can become the victim of his political ideas. Three weeks ahead of the elections, that is extremely alarming,” said Prime Minister Alexander De Croo of Belgium, which holds the EU presidency.

“Let's make it an intense campaign when it comes to words, but not beyond that,” De Croo told the regional broadcaster VRT. Underscoring the seriousness of the issue, De Croo filed a police complaint Thursday against a broadcaster at a local event who called, apparently in jest, for the prime minister “to be shot."

Such incidents are no laughing matter. In Germany last week, a prominent Berlin politician was violently assaulted and suffered injuries to her head and neck. A week earlier, [*a candidate*](https://apnews.com/article/germany-europe-election-matthias-ecke-78eec937352dc4de1c3c8bc6e58e3be7) from the party of Chancellor [*Olaf Scholz*](https://apnews.com/hub/olaf-scholz) was beaten up while campaigning for next month’s [*election for the European Parliament*](https://apnews.com/eu-election-2024) and had to undergo surgery.

The ***politics*** of compromise laid the foundations for Europe’s famed welfare society, but in recent years, aggressive discourse and unbridled partisanship have been on the rise.

“There was dialogue and with political plodding, solutions emerged. But now, all too often, that doesn’t work anymore,” said Prof. Hendrik Vos of Ghent University.

Slovakia is a case in point. Fico’s mastery of confrontational ***politics*** brought him back from the political wilderness and helped secure him a third term in office.

Fico campaigned on a pro-Russian, anti-American platform, a foreign policy liberated from its EU links, a tougher stance on migration and opposition to LGBTQ+ rights.

After he returned to power last year, he immediately set about dismantling the office of the anti-corruption prosecutor and bringing the public broadcaster, RTVS, under tighter government control. However, concerns in the EU about democratic backsliding and the rule of law have now been overtaken by events on the ground.

“Fico’s ***politics*** may be a threat to democracy, but this kind of violence in European ***politics*** is a much bigger threat,” political scientist Tom Theuns, of Leiden University, told The Associated Press.

“In this period of polarization at European level, we see that the quality of democratic discourse has gone backward and politicians are increasingly depicted as enemies, both by other politicians and by the general public,” Theuns said. “Such discourse to increasingly see each other as ‘enemies’ legitimizes violence in the eyes of those who could possibly use it."

As Fico lay in hospital, outgoing President Zuzana Caputova, one of his staunchest opponents, pleaded to “step out of the vicious circle of hatred and mutual accusations.” Caputova acknowledged that "the tense atmosphere of hatred was our collective work.”

Even Fico himself was predicting that the blaze would rage out of control: on April 10, he posted on Facebook that he would expect a slaying of a leading politician and blamed the media, long a target of his ire.

In 2018, he stepped down amid mass street protests after an investigative journalist who had been reporting on tax-related crimes implicating some in Fico’s party, was murdered, along with his fiancée.

It is too early to say what impact, if any, the attack on Fico would have on the EU elections, since they are highly compartmentalized in 27 separate polls in the member states.

In Slovakia, though, the effect is likely to be felt, predicted Juraj Majcin, analyst at the European Policy Center think tank in Brussels.

The attack “certainly won’t help the less extreme parties," he said, adding that the "chances are that the people will be more motivated to go and vote for people like Fico.”

Even if Fico and his Smer party do well in the elections, their influence in the European Parliament is limited: his tiny parliamentary fraction has even been suspended by the socialist group. Fico himself wields more influence at the summits of EU leaders, where often he can threaten to veto items of business that displease him.

Rather, the Slovak leader is part of a much larger continental shift toward populist parties of the left and right, a move away from the center ground and the often messy compromises of the once-dominant big-tent parties such as the Christian Democrats and Socialists.

Fico is the latest in a surprisingly long list of political victims in postwar Europe. For all their non-confrontational ***politics*** of the postwar years, leaders have fallen victims to extremists before. Perhaps most infamously, Swedish Prime Minister Olaf Palme was murdered in 1986, and foreign minister Anna Lindh was also in office when killed in 2003.

German stalwart Wolfgang Schaeuble, a key figure in the reunification of Germany and the EU financial crisis a decade ago, survived an assassination attempt in 1990 but was left permanently disabled. A similar fate befell about a half dozen politicians, former and active, in the EU.

And even when nothing serious happens, the threat alone can have a massive impact.

On Thursday, anti-Islam firebrand Geert Wilders became the power behind the throne in a [*new Dutch government*](https://apnews.com/article/netherlands-government-radical-right-immigration-wilders-77ff99e0798d54d150d320706a685a38) that is throwing overboard compromise ***politics*** to set up the most radical rightwing coalition since the war.

Wilders has always thrived on confrontation that some equaled to hate speech. And he has never toned down the strident nature of his campaigning. He has had the highest level of security protection for two decades, since a jihadist website distributed a video calling for his beheading. Following the threat, he was temporarily moved to a safe house.

Wilders now travels in an armored car, surrounded by security personnel. The Dutch security services purchased a home and converted it into a permanent safe house.

The danger is far from abstract: in 2002, maverick Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn, a precursor of today's far right, [*was murdered*](https://apnews.com/general-news-72fddb0a41624d6582501958abfc7b62) by an animal rights activist.

During a court hearing last year over [*death threats made against him*](https://apnews.com/article/netherlands-pakistan-wilders-islam-0775f2940d788591f08c7e96af641da0) by Pakistani cricketer Khalid Latif, Wilders said of the measures “You never get used to all that. You learn to deal with it, but you never get used to it.”