

## The Divisions Splitting a Rising European Far-Right

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Elections and polls show a rising trend of far-right forces in Europe. Despite recent setbacks, such as in Poland, the overall picture indicates that in the European elections in June, the highly diverse and disunited far-right constellation will achieve better results than in 2019. These parties have chances to win in Italy, France, the Netherlands, Hungary, and Austria, and to come second in Germany, among other places. According to projections by EuropeElects based on poll averages, if the vote were held today, parties to the right of the European People's Party (EPP) — with strong Eurosceptic representation — would secure more than 180 of the 720 seats in the European Parliament.

Such a result would grant the far-right significant influence in a European legislature that will tackle major EU transformation projects. It could slow down the green transition, says Rosa Balfour, director of Carnegie Europe, as well as affect EU rules on the rule of law, eastern enlargement, and pave the way for even more restrictive migration policies. “And the Parliament could become even more polarized on critical foreign policy challenges, such as support for Ukraine against the Russian invasion and responses to the war between Israel and Hamas and the escalation in the Middle East,” notes Balfour, co-author of an extensive study on the influence of the radical right in the Union with Stefan Lehne.

However, any analysis of the space often labeled under the single tag of far-right must consider the considerable differences alongside the commonalities among the parties within it.

These divergences affect some of the most important issues on the political agenda. Regarding Russia, some — like Poland's Law and Justice (PiS) or Italy's Brothers of Italy, led by Giorgia Meloni — favor very firm positions, while others (such as France's Marine Le Pen, Italy's Matteo Salvini, or the German far-right AfD, Alternative for Germany) are much more tepid or even lean towards pro-Kremlin stances.

On women's rights and societal roles, the Nordic far-right holds much more advanced positions compared to the ultra-conservatives in southern or eastern Europe, reflects Giovanni Capoccia, a professor of comparative politics at Oxford University and an expert on extremism, in a phone interview on this topic in late March. Differences can also be detected in fiscal and social policies.

An emblem of these divergences is their division in the European Parliament. In the current legislature, they are aligned in two groups: the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR: Brothers of Italy, PiS, Vox, Sweden Democrats, among others) and Identity and Democracy (ID: French National Rally, AfD, Italian League, among others). Fidesz, led by national-populist Viktor Orbán, which used to be part of the European People's Party, is not affiliated with any group.

The differences between ID and ECR prevent the formation of a large far-right group in the European Parliament. For many reformists and conservatives, the positions closer to Russia of some ID members rule out that possibility, as noted by Italian Brothers of Italy MEP Nicola Procaccini.

Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission and the EPP's candidate to continue in the role, opened the door this week to forms of cooperation with the ECR, as desired by many in

her group. Her gesture has caused significant discontent among the Social Democrats and the left, increasing accusations of her “whitewashing” the far-right.

But even within the ECR, there are notable differences, say various EPP sources in several interviews since March. The party of Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala — courted by the EPP to join their group — is not the same as France's Reconquête, founded by Éric Zemmour, a major promoter of the “great replacement” conspiracy theory. Additionally, there is a vast distance between the radically anti-abortion positions of PiS and a much more liberal view on the issue by parties like the Sweden Democrats.

There are also severe differences — and tensions — within ID, as evidenced by the recent frictions between two of its star members: Marine Le Pen's National Rally and AfD. The alliance with the German partner, more radical in some points, complicates Le Pen's effort to present a moderate image.

When Le Pen and her party's president and European candidate, Jordan Bardella, had lunch in Paris on February 20 with AfD co-chair Alice Weidel, the French opted for discretion. Weidel, on the other hand, made the meeting public.

Bardella later explained on BFMTV that during the lunch, he and Le Pen expressed their “disagreement with the measure that involves withdrawing citizenship from people who have acquired it, based on their origin or religious affiliation.” The revelations in Germany about the far-right's plans to expel migrants en masse have discomfited their French counterparts, who consider them too radical.

Of course, these parties share clear political and rhetorical elements. “I believe the major common denominators are nationalism and the migration issue,” says Capoccia.

Ignacio Molina, a senior researcher at the Elcano Royal Institute and professor at the Autonomous University of Madrid, adds another: “The law and order discourse, largely linked to migration, with the attempt to associate insecurity with immigration.”

In many cases, attempts at cooperation or projecting an image of a common movement can be detected, including with similar forces across the Atlantic, like Trump or Milei.

But as shown by the Le Pen-AfD dispute, even in these common denominators, the concrete implementation of policies differs based on multiple factors, from being in power (or close to gaining it) to being far from it, to the dominant values in the societies whose votes they seek.

“These parties generally adapt flexibly to the issues in the societies they operate in and try to fight from positions that are not losers from the start,” observes Capoccia. “Thus, we see that the Sweden Democrats’ position on women's rights may resemble that of a left-wing party elsewhere in Europe. In contrast, where Christian values are deeply rooted, the far-right takes very conservative positions, connecting the role of women with the idea of a civilization battle, with a procreational role, having more children so immigrants are not needed for the economy,” continues the expert.

Molina notes other differential elements, including that some of these parties have an ultra-liberal matrix while others have a significant component of social protection, and the latter touch much more strongly on the “welfare state chauvinism” chord. “Parties like Vox or AfD have a strong ultra-

liberal component at their origin, advocating for low taxes. Others, in contrast, emphasize the desire to maintain a robust welfare state and try to stigmatize foreigners who they claim take advantage of the system, reducing its effectiveness,” says Molina.

Another important element is adherence to democratic values. Fidesz, under Orbán, or Poland’s PiS (from the ECR that von der Leyen opens the door to) have led government actions deemed harmful to democratic quality by the European Commission and multiple independent research centers. Brussels has also issued warnings to the Slovak government for measures such as dismantling the special anti-corruption prosecutor’s office. In contrast, no such actions or warnings have been directed at the exercise of power by Giorgia Meloni in Italy.