



# The heterogeneity of the ‘far right’

European View

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## Abstract

This article provides a comparative analysis of the transnational parties unquestionably located to the right of the European People’s Party in the European Parliament. The article answers three questions. First, how do the stances of the European Conservatives and Reformists, Patriots for Europe and Europe of Sovereign Nations differ on key contemporary issues such as EU integration, the Russia–Ukraine war and the economy? Second, how might Europe’s future be impacted if one or more of these groups were to gain dominance over the others? And third, most crucially, how can—or should—the European People’s Party respond to the rise of these more radical forces? In this context, the first part of the article focuses on the ideological divergences among far-right actors in the European Parliament. The second part sets forth three distinct scenarios pertaining to potential future right-wing alliances at the EU level (including their implications for the Union’s policy trajectory) and explores the European People’s Party’s role in consistently containing far-right influence within the EU framework.

## Keywords

Far right, Populism, European Parliament, EU integration, EPP, ECR, European far right, Transnational parties

## Introduction

With right-wing anti-establishment parties increasing their electoral support and influence across Europe, the umbrella term ‘far right’ is being increasingly utilised in academia to refer to political parties that are both illiberal–democratic (e.g. the populist radical right) and fully anti-democratic (e.g. the extreme right) (see Pirro 2022). On one

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hand, the precision of this term may be contentious given there is a fundamental normative difference between actors that are critical of the constitutional principles of liberal democracy (the rule of law and minority rights) but *not of* popular sovereignty and those that reject the values of democracy altogether. The actors to whom the term ‘far right’ is applied are highly heterogeneous (Mudde 2019), and this makes it difficult to find a single term that convincingly encompasses them all. On the other hand, adopting appropriate terminology is useful insofar as it provides scholars with a framework to study and comprehend those parties that are located further to the right on the political spectrum than mainstream liberal–conservatives.

Against this background, and with the emergence of a ‘fourth wave’ of far-right politics (Accardo and Mudde 2020), this article offers a comparative analysis of those transnational parties clearly located to the right of the moderate European People’s Party (EPP) in the European Parliament. Given the heterogeneous stances of the right-wing European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), Patriots for Europe (PfE) and Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN), it is paramount to emphasise that the trajectory of the EU’s foreign policy could follow divergent routes depending on which one of these groups gains more influence at the European level. Hence, by adopting a combination of discourse, manifesto and policy analysis, this article aims to answer three questions. First, how do the stances of the ECR, PfE and ESN differ on key contemporary issues, such as EU integration, the Russia–Ukraine war and the economy? Second, how might Europe’s future be impacted if one or more of these groups were to gain dominance over the others? And third, most crucially, how can—or should—the EPP respond to the rise of these more radical forces?

## **ECR, PfE and ESN: a comparative analysis**

### *EU integration*

Most far-right actors in the European Parliament are Eurosceptic (van Kessel 2025, 128) and question the legitimacy of EU integration. However, the extent to which they are Eurosceptic varies according to the party family they belong to within this institution. For example, the ECR Group, a collection of right-wing conservatives and populists, is more open to discussing further EU integration and enlargement than the PfE and ESN. Its pragmatist, and relatively moderate, stances (Steven 2025, 394) indicate that there is a substantial *ideological* distinction between conservatives (who sporadically use populist rhetoric) and radical-right populists and extremists.

‘Soft Eurosceptics’<sup>1</sup> in the ECR call for the EU to be reformed from within (*Europaportalen* 2024, 1). This group is critical of the EU’s management of migratory flows to date and has also proposed a revision of climate treaties and bureaucratic regulation pertaining to agriculture (*Europaportalen* 2024, 2). Nevertheless, it is debatable whether ECR parties (to which the ‘far right’ label is contentiously applied) such as New Flemish Alliance (Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie) can be labelled Eurosceptic at all, given they have never disputed the ‘utility and importance’ of the EU (Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie

n.d.), nor have they advocated for leaving the bloc. Similarly, another key player from the same group, Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia), has long abandoned its anti-European positions. It currently favours constructive cooperation among EU member states (see *Ansa.it English* 2026) and also EU enlargement to the Western Balkans (Al Shmaly et al. n.d.). Further still, the ECR can be considered 'pro-European' to some extent, given its support for a common EU defence and security policy and the liberalisation of the single market (Steven 2025, 389).

Conversely, it is somewhat unclear whether the PfiE can today be described as a group that is better characterised by *soft Euroscepticism* or *hard Euroscepticism*.<sup>2</sup> In essence, after the problematic outcome of Brexit, it appears that even those PfiE parties that were hardline Eurosceptics no longer see leaving the bloc as a feasible objective, especially economically. In any event, most of these parties are opposed to EU enlargement, and some (e.g. National Rally/Rassemblement national) even hold that it would threaten national sovereignty and lead to mass immigration (Al Shmaly et al. n.d.). And concerning European integration (a common monetary policy; the supremacy of EU law, bureaucracy and legal norms; and political integration), populists such as the League (Lega) and the Dutch Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid) propose a leaner EU, focused on doing less—but doing it better (Ajello and Salvini 2024; Ellyatt 2024). Similarly, Marine Le Pen has reconsidered her initial idea for a referendum on EU membership and has openly stated she does 'not want to leave the EU' (Henley and Rankin 2022). However, her domestic agenda is mostly in conflict with EU rules (Henley and Rankin 2022).

Turning to the ESN, these 'hard Eurosceptics' 'firmly oppose the building of a European unitary state' (ESN 2024). Although they are open to maintaining the common market (this means a virtual return to the European Economic Community), this group is fervently opposed to the EU and European integration. Even so, not all ESN members reject the EU outright. Those who do rarely state this explicitly in institutional contexts, especially within EU parliamentary settings. The Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD), which accounts for the majority of the ESN Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and is unquestionably far right (even expressing Nazi sympathies), has removed exiting the EU from its latest programme while also campaigning for its dissolution in East Germany (*DW News* 2024). Other smaller parties belonging to the ESN have echoed the AfD's hard Euroscepticism. For instance, the Czech Freedom and Direct Democracy party (Svoboda a přímá demokracie) has long supported a referendum on leaving the EU (Lopatka 2025). In any case, the ESN's joint programme does not openly call for its member parties to withdraw from the EU. Rather, the group opposes the political union while supporting the common market (ESN 2024).

In simple terms, among the European Parliament's far-right groups, the ECR accepts some elements of EU integration while opposing others, the PfiE strongly criticises this aspect of the EU and the ESN is so sceptical of integration that the group rejects it altogether.

## Russia–Ukraine

Anti-Western stances—and anti-Americanism more broadly—are not uncommon in the galaxy of far-right parties (see Gressel 2017). The extent to which a party supports Russia depends on how far to the right it is positioned on the political spectrum. For example, PfiE parties have been ambivalent when it comes to condemning Russia. These include the League, the National Rally and the Freedom Party of Austria (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs), all of which have either opposed or been hesitant about imposing sanctions on Russia and aiding Ukraine. This position is distinct from the explicitly pro-Russian stance taken by the AfD and various Central and Eastern Europe parties affiliated with the ESN Group, including the Bulgarian Revival party (Vъзраждане), the Slovakian Republic Movement (Hnutie Republika), and the Czech Freedom and Direct Democracy party. Prominent AfD figures, such as Alice Weidel, have propagated a Eurasian vision according to which Germany and Russia continue to have solid diplomatic and trade relations.<sup>3</sup> Weidel has stated, '[O]ur children, our sons, our soldiers will never die for Ukraine' (Hook Global 2024, 0:28). The AfD also advocates the withdrawal of American troops and nuclear weapons from Germany, and the lifting of sanctions against Russia (*DW News* 2024).

This outlook presupposes a gradual distancing from both NATO and the EU, in order to prepare for a multipolar world where Russia and China (rather than the US) will lead. Indeed, an AfD-led Germany would probably join the Eurasian Economic Union and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation as an observer state (*DW News* 2024). Aside from the AfD, it is right-wing extremists from Slavic countries (some found within the ESN—see Mudde 2024, 129) who are especially prone to defend Russia. They do so not merely due to their pan-Slavism and nostalgia for a 'strongman', but because Putin's illiberal regime is seen as a bulwark of Christianity against decadent Western liberalism and American imperialism, as well as against Islam and immigration from developing countries.

Similarly, among PfiE-affiliated parties, we find prominent national-level leaders and MEPs who have consistently praised Putin over the last decade. Although currently more cautious, the League's leader, Matteo Salvini, has said, 'Putin's Russia is surely much more democratic than the EU' as it is set up today (Cicchetti 2025, author's translation). Notwithstanding this remark, in legislative votes Salvini's party has aligned with the mainstream right in Italy and Europe, never opposing sanctions on Russia or the provision of aid to Ukraine. While Marine Le Pen, an ally of the League in the European Parliament, has not consistently defended Putin, up until quite recently she has dismissed assertions that he threatened Europe as 'a big scam' and has refused to condemn Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea (Sharkov 2017; Pasha-Robinson 2017). In any case, it should be noted that Le Pen's stance on Putin has now changed, as it has become increasingly difficult to side with Russia after its attacks on Kyiv. Another top PfiE representative, Hungary's Viktor Orbán, has regularly criticised Volodymyr Zelenskyy for his handling of the conflict, insisting, 'Russia has won the war' (*Reuters* 2025).

By contrast, in terms of foreign policy, the ECR is the group that is most aligned with the US and NATO (de Candia and Bressanelli 2024, 39). In its manifesto this group announces that it stands ‘firmly with Ukraine against Russian aggression’ and that it is ‘committed to enhancing EU–NATO cooperation by boosting defence budgets’ (*Europaportalen* 2024, 1). Certain ECR members, including Giorgia Meloni’s Brothers of Italy, have even proposed extending NATO’s Article 5 to cover the defence of Ukraine (Caruso 2025, 4). No such Atlanticist statements can be found in the manifestos of the PfE and ESN, which have conveniently decided to disregard the issue. Therefore, regarding the Russia–Ukraine issue, conservative (rather than markedly far-right) parties wholeheartedly condemn Putin’s invasion of Ukraine and have consistently supported sanctioning Russia and aiding Zelenskyy. These include the Brothers of Italy, the New Flemish Alliance, the Finns Party (Perussuomalaiset), the Denmark Democrats (Danmarksdemokraterne) and various smaller organisations in Eastern Europe.

### *The economy*

Right-wing conservatives, populists and extremists tend to disagree on economic matters. Given this, there are at least two economic approaches commonly taken by the ‘far right’. The first is the market-based economy approach. This position predominates within the ECR Group (Steven 2025, 385). Apart from Poland’s Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość), which represents a unique case of economically redistributive social conservatism (Kostadinova 2024), ECR parties hold economic views that are nearly identical to those of the centre–right (see Otjes 2024). Essentially, they endorse low taxation, a small state, fair competition, freedom of enterprise, domestic deregulation, privatisation and a ‘pro-market’ approach (*Europaportalen* 2024; de Candia and Bressanelli 2024, 39). These liberal economic views (Verger et al. 2024, 4) have facilitated an alignment between the ECR and the EPP on monetary policy (Broniecki and Højlund 2025, 641), allowing the ECR to present itself as a responsible and pragmatic partner within the European Parliament.

Meloni, former leader of the ECR, has said that ‘the state does not generate jobs’ (Pavarani 2023) and has also referred to taxes as ‘state extortion’ (Casadio 2023), mirroring the ideological perspectives of Thatcherites. However, in other circumstances, Meloni and her party have also highlighted the importance of state mediation (to protect jobs and products from unfair competition) and even the use of the government’s ‘special power’ to intervene in certain strategic sectors (e.g. defence, energy, telecommunications and infrastructure) (see Carlino 2024; Italian Government Presidency of the Council of Ministers 2002).

The second approach is the more statist, semi-dirigiste economic policy pursued by parties within the PfE, such as the League or the National Rally, which espouse anti-trade liberalisation and prefer an economy guided by the state (Cliffe et al. 2025). Unlike the ECR, these parties are *unequivocally* far right in the sense that they are radically populist and aim to profoundly transform the prevailing status quo. The PfE claims it wants a Europe of ‘strong, proud and independent nations’ (Patriots.EU n.d.). This sometimes

results in supporting forms of protectionism (e.g. tariffs), import substitution, re-industrialisation (Cattani 2016; 2017), fixed prices for foodstuffs, and greater taxation of both foreign companies (especially multinationals) and big business. Moreover, populist radical-right parties (e.g. Fidesz) are known for their desire to nationalise key industries (Kenes 2020, 24). However, unlike neo-fascist and neo-Nazi parties, they are not anti-capitalist per se. In a way, they espouse a peculiar set of beliefs that combine Reaganite tax cuts with a dirigiste orientation; curiously, this is essentially the same economic stance as that of American President Donald Trump (see Capezzone 2025, 135). A relatively precise way to describe such parties would be as ‘liberal–protectionist’—as the scholar Lorenzo Cattani (2016; 2017) suggests.

Paradoxically, the extreme-right ESN (Mudde 2024, 129) claims in its manifesto that it is a pro-market force (ESN 2024). In theory, this puts it at odds with historical fascism, which derived from ‘revolutionary socialism’ and displayed anti-capitalist and anti-liberal characteristics (Gentile 2001, 32). Thus, the contemporary extreme right is, in a sense, *sui generis*. That the ‘new’ far right has rarely held power—remaining mostly in opposition and moderating its positions when in government (e.g. Meloni)—makes it difficult to draw definitive conclusions about its economic *Weltanschauung*. At present, what is clear is that, in most cases, the far right—particularly the populist radical right—blends right-wing economic positions with left-wing ones, resulting in an idiosyncratic political synthesis.

### Three scenarios

Thus far, this article has focused on analysing the diverse positions that the far-right parties in the European Parliament hold on important contemporary issues. At this point in the discussion, it will be apparent that the trajectory of the EU (especially in terms of foreign policy) is increasingly dependent on which one of these electorally strengthened rightist groups gains parliamentary weight during the next European elections. In fact, if the electoral rise of the far right persists (this is a plausible outcome), moderate forces such as the EPP will have to continue to adapt to this state of affairs. Centre–left and left-wing forces emerged from the 2024 elections both weaker and structurally challenged. Setting aside the possibility that they will recover significantly, one is left with three possible scenarios. Whilst it is unlikely the first two will occur, the third scenario stands out as a real possibility.

#### *First scenario*

A large far-right coalition materialises in the coming years, meaning that either before or after the 2029 EU elections, the ECR, the PöE and the ESN (or even solely the ECR and the PöE) merge to give birth to a single European political group. This would only be possible and practical if over the forthcoming five years, all three parties make gains that are substantial enough that they are able to direct the EU. Were this to happen, a united far right would likely completely alter the geopolitical order of our time. They would do this by, for instance, working towards the gradual dismantlement of the EU, exiting

NATO, employing repressive policies to curb immigration and setting society back 30 to 50 years to a pre-Maastricht Treaty or European Economic Community era, during which the union was largely economic rather than political. Hypothetically, a far-right-led Europe would be oriented eastwards, building strong ties with Russia (and possibly China) while severing its ‘special relationship’ with the US. However, there is no real possibility of such a coalition winning a majority in the near future. Current trends suggest it would have fewer than 30% of the MEPs, making it unable to effectively run the EU. More crucially, as shown in the previous section, the three transnational actors disagree on several fundamental issues—ranging from the Russia–Ukraine war to EU integration and the roles of the state and the market. Surprisingly, even on immigration their views occasionally differ, for while the conservatives (ECR) may welcome a *legal* foreign workforce as a business incentive, the populist right (PfE) and extreme right (ESN) hold a less pragmatic and more ideology-driven stance against immigration. Furthermore, both the ECR and PfE have clearly indicated they intend to distance themselves from extremist actors (Oliveira 2016; Von Pezold et al. 2024). In fact, it was under the leadership of Le Pen that the AfD was expelled from the Identity and Democracy group (the PfE’s predecessor), after one of its German MEPs made pro-Nazi statements to the press (Von Pezold et al. 2024).

### *Second scenario*

A big-tent centre–right to right-wing coalition is formed in response to a ‘radicalisation’ of left-wing forces in the lead-up to or aftermath of the 2029 European elections. The purpose of such a realignment would be to oppose authoritarian drifts brought about by ‘woke ideology’, radical environmentalism and neo-statism. The possibility of an alliance forming between the EPP and the ECR (which, unlike the PfE and the ESN, is not outside the European Parliament’s *cordon sanitaire*) has already been discussed at the EU level and—to some extent—even promoted by EPP President Manfred Weber (Daniele 2024). However, not all factions of the EPP support this proposition, and although ECR parties are leading in some countries (Italy and Belgium), such an alliance might never have the numbers to significantly influence the European Parliament and the EU’s agenda (Daniele 2024). Moreover, the EPP risks alienating its base and traditional allies (Liberals and Social Democrats) by formally joining forces with the ECR. In any case, an EU led by the EPP and the ECR would continue to be a democratic institution, guided by the principles of classical liberalism and inspired by Western values such as respect for human rights, popular sovereignty and the rule of law. It would be an EU firmly rooted in the Atlantic alliance and one that pursues the long-term strategic partnership with the US (regardless of whether it is led by Republicans or Democrats).

### *Third scenario*

The EPP continues to occasionally vote alongside and collaborate with the ECR on certain issues in Parliament, doing this on a text-by-text basis. Given that, as has already been established, the two groups share similar views on the economy (Verger et al. 2024, 16), prolonged cooperation is possible at the legislative level. This is especially the case

now that parties that were reluctant to accept collaboration between the EPP and the ECR (e.g. the Spanish Vox party) have withdrawn from the conservative transnational party. In theory—as Weber himself noted—the EPP and ECR largely agree on any matter involving (free) trade, business and the single market (Steven 2025, 388). In practice, the two have already demonstrated that they can create functional voting majorities when it comes to specific areas of economic policy (such as growth-oriented market reform) and the environment. This cooperation applies especially to the latter issue, because the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) sometimes disagrees with the EPP on the environment (Verger et al. 2024, 11). Essentially, even though the grand coalition dominated the agenda in the ninth European Parliament legislature (and technically still dominates), this may change in the future, especially due to the ECR becoming more electorally relevant. In any event, as ‘a key player in the European decision-making process’, the EPP will have the option to work together with the ECR whenever the grand coalition (temporarily) crumbles, since the conservative group is undeniably the EPP’s main ally on the right (see Verger et al. 2024, 10, 14). In summary, intermittent collaboration could serve as the foundation for a more substantial partnership down the line.

### The EPP’s role in containing the far right

In the recent past, the S&D has strongly criticised the EPP, claiming the latter is ‘normalising the extreme right’ (S&D 2022). However, the EPP has never done this. Rather, guided by ‘Eurorealism’ and pragmatic considerations, it has cooperated strategically with ‘national-conservatives’ (for a definition of this term, see Verger et al. 2024, 1) on key public policy issues. Furthermore, in the past the EPP has refused to collaborate with more radical actors, such as with the PfE’s precursor, Identity and Democracy. It even suspended Orbán’s Fidesz—Hungarian Civic Alliance (Fidesz—Magyar Polgári Szövetség) from its ranks in 2019 (Thorpe 2019). More crucially, at the EU level the EPP has effectively contained the far right in two ways. First, it has structured its institutions to favour moderate leadership (and consistently backed Europhile commissioners). Second, it has maintained a *cordon sanitaire*, whereby mainstream and pro-European forces cooperate to ostracise radical actors from committees and other decision-making bodies.

It also warrants consideration that—according to the ‘inclusion–moderation thesis’ put forward by some commentators—far-right actors moderate their communication and/or programmes when governing in tandem with more centrist parties (Capaul and Ewert 2021; Thomeczek and Bernhard 2025). Historically, this has mainly been the result of pressure exerted by the larger and more politically experienced centre–right coalition ‘partners’ in Europe, many of whom belong to the EPP (e.g. the Austrian People’s Party/Österreichische Volkspartei, Forza Italia, Norway’s Conservative Party/Høyre etc.). With regard to the ECR, the EPP bears no responsibility for the legitimisation of the national-conservatives. The ECR has legitimised itself as the parties within it have detached themselves from the far right, and have demonstrated that they are now practically part of the mainstream camp through legislative action (such as voting with the grand coalition on support to Ukraine and NATO-related issues). However,

considering that these parties are ‘here to stay’ (Broder 2023) and even on the rise (Bright 2026), the EPP should maintain a cautious approach: neither profoundly demarcating nor fully accommodating these actors.

## Conclusion

This article has examined the positions of ‘far-right’ parties in the European Parliament with the aim of showing that the ECR, PfiE and ESN all adhere to different strands of the political right and hold heterogeneous views on European integration, the Russia–Ukraine conflict and the economy. Considering these differences, it is evident that a (hypothetical) future EU led by staunchly Eurosceptic, illiberal nationalist forces (such as the PfiE and ESN) would seek to turn back the clock on European integration to the mid-to-late twentieth century. In economic matters, protectionism and tariffs would likely replace freedom of movement and trade. And in one way or another, these forces would steer what remained of the EU towards a pro-Russian, and potentially pro-Chinese, orientation.

Naturally, the EPP could never associate with any explicitly anti-European forces that question the legitimacy of traditional Western institutions and alliances at a supranational level, while concomitantly challenging the rule of law and minority rights domestically. Nonetheless, this article has shown that alternative scenarios are possible. A Europe guided in the near or more distant future by an EPP–ECR majority would be firmly grounded in the Atlantic alliance and serve as a liberal–democratic bulwark against aggressive (and repressive) authoritarian regimes in a multipolar world. Although the two originate from distinct *familles spirituelles*, it is in the EPP’s best interest to continue to intermittently collaborate with respectable organisations such as the ECR, which shares the same Western democratic principles and goals. Such collaboration would also prevent the EPP from being gradually pulled towards the left by its S&D and Renew Europe allies. Future studies could specifically analyse in depth which policy fields would allow for more consistent (rather than intermittent) future collaboration.

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## Notes

1. ‘Soft Euroscepticism is where there is *not* a principled objection to European integration or EU membership but where concerns on one (or a number) of policy areas lead to the expression of qualified opposition to the EU, or where there is a sense that “national interest” is currently at odds with the EU’s trajectory’ (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2002, 4).

2. 'Hard Euroscepticism is where there is a principled opposition to the EU and European integration and therefore can be seen in parties who think that their countries should withdraw from membership, or whose policies towards the EU are tantamount to being opposed to the whole project of European integration as it is currently conceived' (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2002, 4).
3. This position is supported by illiberal philosophers such as Alexander Dugin.

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