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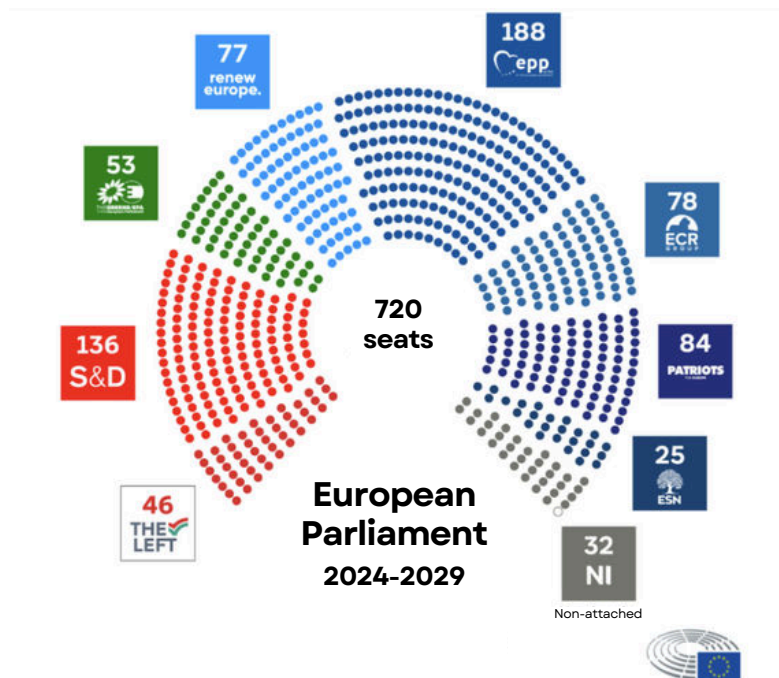
THE UNION OF RIGHT-WINGERS IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT: DECISION-MAKING COAGULATIONS OR POLITICAL CONVERGENCE?

The verdict of the European elections of June 2024 first reflects a relative political continuity, confirming both the dominance of the conservative right of the European People's Party (EPP), which now holds 26% of the seats in Strasbourg, and the resilience of the Socialists & Democrats (S&D) group, which regressed very slightly to 18.9% of the seats. On this basis, many of the first votes of the legislature concerning the distribution of posts in the European Parliament, the election of members of the Commission and several initiatives at the start of the mandate have resulted in a fairly broad agreement between these two political groups, supported by the "Renew" liberals (10.7% of the seats, compared with 14% in 2019) and the Greens (7.4% compared with 10.2%).

In an institutional context also marked by a substantial increase in the number of seats held by nationalist right-wing and far-right parties in the European Parliament, a number of votes - initially consultative, then legislative - were also won thanks to a combination of approvals from the EPP and the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) (which includes MEPs from Fratelli d'Italia and the Polish Pis), as well as the "Patriots for Europe" group (created at the instigation of Viktor Orban and the Rassemblement National) and the "Europe of Sovereign Nations" group (ESN), created around members of the German AfD.

For example, a resolution on the political situation in Venezuela, another on the possibility of the EU budget financing the construction of walls on its borders, and then votes to postpone the ban on imported deforestation.

Does this “decision-making coagulations” between conservatives and the far right reflect an institutional, ideological and philosophical rapprochement that is likely to recur in the long term, or does it rather reflect considerations of an ad hoc or even tactical nature? It is important to grasp the significance of this union of right-wing parties, since it could help shape the direction of the European Parliament and the EU in the short and medium term, in a particularly adverse and stimulating civic and international environment.



*Breakdown of MEPs by political group (2024-...)
(source: European Parliament, July 2024)*

1. Right-wing forces in the institutional triangle: a weight which is strengthened, but not decisive

One of the historic consequences of the June 2024 electoral verdict is to lead to the numerical possibility of forming parliamentary majorities without the center and the left, i.e. majorities to the right of the EPP (see Figure 1). This numerical reality is underpinned by the growth of the ECR group, which now holds 10.3% of the seats (compared to 9.3% before), but also of the PFE group, which has become the 3rd largest political group, with 11.6% of the seats, compared to 8.8% for its predecessor “Identity & Democracy”.

This is likely to consolidate the central role of the EPP Conservative group, which could even transform itself into a pivotal group whenever it considers and undertakes to form majorities on its right.

The distribution of positions of responsibility within the new Parliament has initially led the EPP to favor a “grand coalition”-type format, including by maintaining a cordon sanitaire preventing MEPs from the PFE group from obtaining any key role. This is why, for example, 7 of the parliamentary committee chairmanships have gone to the EPP, 5 to the S&D, 2 to Renew - but also 3 to the ECR. But the recent appointment of Sarah Knafo, member of Reconquête and ESN, as rapporteur for a text on European digital sovereignty, was only possible thanks to the majority support of MEPs from the whole of the right, whereas the proportional distribution of rapporteur positions does not usually include such peripheral groups.

It is also noteworthy that the votes on imported deforestation were the result of negotiations between the EPP and the ECR, which did not involve the representatives of the PFE and ESN groups, who were reduced to the role of auxiliaries, in this case decisive (see example in Chart 2). It is the advent of regular, structured discussions between these 4 groups that would be likely to forge a genuine union of right-wing parties. At this stage, it appears that EPP group chairman Manfred Weber has mainly sought to render less theoretical his possibility of evading his traditional negotiations with S&D and Renew, by means of essentially tactical warning shots aimed at strengthening his influence vis-à-vis his traditional partners rather than initiating an alternative political strategy.



*Vote on an amendment to the directive on imported deforestation
(source: European Parliament, November 2024)*

The hypothesis of a right-wing union at EU level would also quickly come up against the balance of power within the other two poles of the EU's institutional triangle - which would then resemble a form of "Bermuda triangle" for the rights.

The Commission now includes almost half of its members from the EPP, as well as two members appointed respectively by Georgia Meloni and Victor Orban: while the Brussels College can theoretically formalize its decisions through simple majority votes, it rather seeks a broad consensus involving all the members and sensibilities represented. Above all, its decisions are often based much more on the national origins of the Commissioners and diplomatic considerations than on partisan or ideological determinants.

The same applies, of course, to the European Council and the EU Council of Ministers, which operate on the basis of compromises linked primarily on state and national issues. While these two institutions have become increasingly right-wing in recent years [1], they count only a limited number of ECR (especially Italian) and PFE (especially Hungarian) representatives, whose nationalism does not necessarily encourage them to cooperate with their supposedly allied counterparts. It is symptomatic that both Georgia Meloni and Victor Orban opposed the reappointment of Ursula von der Leyen as President of the Commission, without succeeding in preventing it since it did not require a unanimous decision by the 27.

Likewise, a highly theoretical union of the right-wing parties in the Council would be hard-pressed to prevail in the event of qualified majority voting, as long as political forces of the left or center govern in enough member states, including populous ones like Spain and France - since they could form blocking minorities if confrontations became partisan. It is more the prospect of national or nationalist blockages in the Council that is to be feared, given that more than a third of its decisions remain subject to the unanimity rule [2], in often sensitive areas: a single recalcitrant state therefore holds such blocking power, without the need to unite with others to this end.

2. A "union of the right" more ideological than partisan?

Electoral competition between conservative right-wing and far-right parties is another factor likely to hinder their union, even if it may also have the effect of fostering their ideological convergence.

[1] For an overview of the partisan affiliations of members of the European Council and European institutions, see Europe elects: <https://europeelects.eu/european-council/>

[2] In the EU's Council of Ministers, 74 legal bases (out of 190) require unanimous decisions - for a detailed inventory, see Y. Bertoncini, T. Chopin *Politique européenne*, Sciences Po Dalloz, 2010, Appendix 1

From a strictly electoral point of view, the Civic Platform led by Donald Tusk is thus in head-on opposition to the PIS rather than in a logic of coming together with it; the same applies to the CDU-CSU and the AFD in Germany, the LR and the RN in France, the Partido popular and Vox in Spain, and so on. The union of the right is certainly the basis of the current Italian government, but it is also at work in Croatia, Finland and the Netherlands, and could soon be in Austria or the Czech Republic : these few examples do not seem to have sufficient drive to inspire the whole of the EU, and they remain characterized by a form of emulation and competition between the parties concerned.

This partisan competition can, however, produce a form of ideological convergence, encouraging traditional parties such as those belonging to the EPP to adopt the orientations and positions formulated by more extreme parties, whose advance they are seeking to stem. As European politics is also a matter of dynamics, it is no longer necessary for extreme right-wing parties to win electoral victories - which in fact remain fairly rare - in order to exert a strong political influence over their more established rivals - an influence which goes far beyond their strict institutional weight. In this respect, the verdict of the German parliamentary elections on February 23, 2025 is certainly a key event, both in Berlin and at European level: firstly, because it will reduce the intensity of the electoral competition underway between the CDU-CSU and the AFD; and secondly, because confirmation of the Conservatives' predicted victory and the possible formation of a coalition with the SPD or the Greens, should encourage them to come to terms once again with their left-wing rivals, a move which is bound to have repercussions in Brussels and Strasbourg.

While the programmatic convergence sometimes observed between right-wing and far-right forces may stem from a form of electoral tactics, it cannot erase the persistence of essential ideological cleavages. These include their visions of the world, Russia, the USA, NATO and China; their real degree of support for membership of the EU, the eurozone and the European area of freedom of movement; their respect for democracy and the rule of law, human and women's rights, the protection of minorities; and their adherence to the principle of European solidarity, be it financial, migratory or energy-related... Not only do the conservative right and the far right often differ on many of these issues, as the clashes between Ursula von der Leyen and Victor Orban have reminded us. But the same is true of members of the ECR, PFE and ESN groups, whose elected representatives are scattered across three groups in Strasbourg, not least because the AFD's elected representatives have been deemed unattractive by those of the RN. This dispersion also puts into perspective the cohesion and European impact of an untraceable "international of nationalists", whereas a "convergence of conservatives" between the EPP and ECR seems much more tangible.

3. Defending the European “way of life”: a common philosophical foundation for the right-wingers?

By announcing at the European Parliament in July 2019 that she wanted to make the “protection of the European way of life” one of the 6 priorities of her 1st mandate, and by linking immigration to it, Ursula von der Leyen may have prefigured a form of philosophical convergence common to all the right-wingers: such a political signal had in fact enabled her to secure her 1st election to within 9 nine votes, thanks to the declared support of the elected members of the Polish PIS. While she quickly had to give priority to “promoting” the European way of life, to retain the support of Renew and S&D, isn't her initial intuition likely to be reaffirmed to give rise to targeted convergences between the right-wingers, as the first joint votes at the start of the legislature suggest?

The defense of the European way of life has been invoked first and foremost in the context of identity and immigration, which feeds the expression of an increasingly assertive racism, but also a form of cultural anxiety to which all right-wing parties appear sensitive. The same is true of political Islamism, which arouses identity-based reactions and tensions on the right, and even security anxieties in the wake of successive terrorist attacks. Against the backdrop of Europe's demographic decline and de-Christianization, these reactions go hand in hand with “nativist” aspirations, feeding into criticism of the right to abortion and medically assisted reproduction, denunciation of homosexual rights (notably marriage and parenthood), and disapproval of LGBT movements and “woke” ideology. First embodied by Victor Orban, such a philosophical crusade long remained the prerogative of the far right - albeit with nuances depending on the party - before finding in Georgia Meloni a leader with a more human face, and whose tirade “Sono Giorgia...” [3] seems to have been emulated across the continent, including in the ranks of the EPP.

Recent criticism of the European Green Deal indicates that the protection of the European way of life is now also targeting the ecological transition and its promoters, based on a philosophical convergence between many right-wing parties. Heating with oil or wood, using combustion-powered vehicles, unrestrained use of pesticides or plastics... are all presumed to be part of a traditional way of life that needs to be preserved against the dictates of “technocrats” presented as out of touch with social, if not environmental, realities. The recent European retreat on the ban on imported deforestation directly echoes these reactions.

[3] See Georgia Meloni “Sono Georgia, Sono una donna, sono una madre, sono italiana, sono cristiana...”: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lh9AMSW_JM0

The preservation of the European way of life can also be enriched by a third, more economic component, including a scathing critique of “Kafkaesque” institutions, public standards and tax levies, perceived as detrimental to individual freedoms and business dynamism. Here too, there are nuances between right-wing and far-right parties, but there is no doubt that the Von der Leyen II Commission's agenda for simplifying administrative procedures and standards will receive very broad support from the EPP, ECR, PFE and ESN groups during the debates in Brussels and Strasbourg.

The initiatives launched by Donald Trump to defend the American, if not Western, way of life are also likely to galvanize European right-wing and far-right forces, even if they will soon be faced with a double challenge: that linked to the ability of their “American uncle's” actions to solve problems often presented in a very simplistic way; that generated by their possible harmfulness to the national interests that right-wing and far-right parties are reputed to defend – since restoring the presumed lost “greatness” of the USA will probably lead to targeting the EU, its member states and its citizens.

This cursory analysis of the institutional, ideological and philosophical rapprochements at work between European right-wing and far-right parties seems to call for a relativization of the impact of the joint votes recently observed in the European Parliament: at the very least, it leads us to emphasize that a succession of “decision-making coagulations” does not constitute a genuine political coalition, which would mark a real break at Community level.

Such an analysis also highlights the central role of the EPP, and in particular its powerful German and Polish components, in defining the political strategy to be favored. In this respect, it is certain that too prolonged a EPP flirtation with the parties of the nationalist right and extreme right would provoke reprisals on the part of the forces of the center and the left: although they may be in retreat, they nonetheless retain a decisive political weight, which is why it is still possible for the Community institutions to be “governed” by an EPP-S&D-Renew informal grand coalition, with the occasional addition of the ECR and/or the Greens.

At a time when their political domination has never been so clear-cut, in a geopolitical context that calls for cooperation, EPP members must choose between two forms of union, that of the Europeans and that of the Right – aware that the latter would lead them to give up the prey for the shadow.