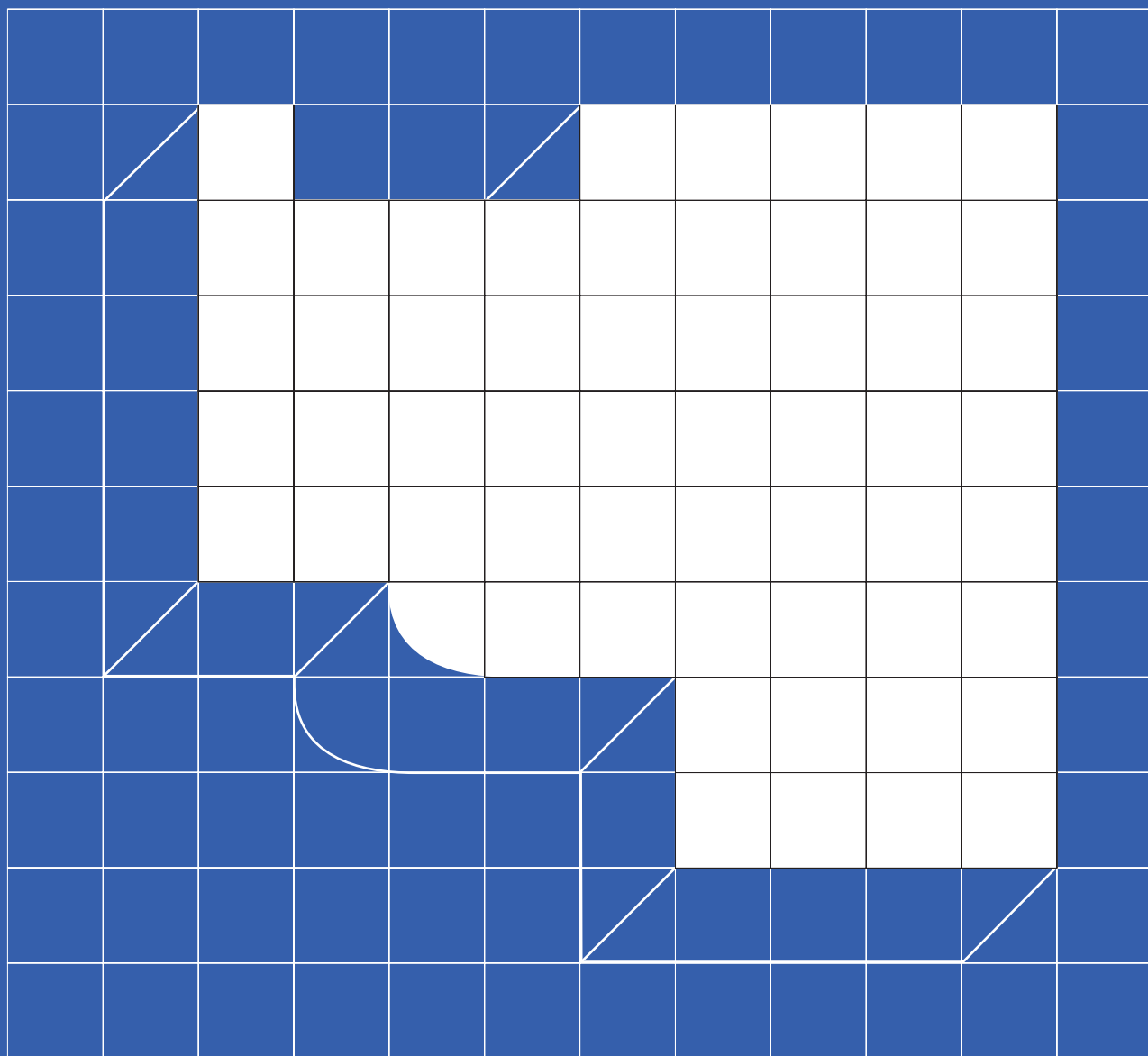


Spelling out the European center-right's dilemma: Renewal of the Grand coalition or National-Conservative Alliance?

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AUTHORS

FRANÇOIS HUBLET, MATTÉO LANOË,
JOHANNA SCHLEYER

45, RUE D'ULM 75005 PARIS
LEGRANDCONTINENT.EU
GEG@ENS.FR

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FRANÇOIS HUBLET, MATTÉO LANOË, JOHANNA SCHLEYER

1. INTRODUCTION¹

One year ahead of the next European election, the European center-right and right-wing parties can feel both confident about their success and worried about their future. On the one hand, conservative and nationalist forces are enjoying undeniable momentum. By increasing their overall vote share only slightly, the three political groups ranging from the center-right to the far-right could secure a parliamentary majority, a fact unprecedented in EU history. At the same time, however, the prospect of a right-wing coalition raises existential questions among centrist parties hostile to such an alliance for ideological or tactical reasons. The arrival in power of a new generation of neo-nationalist leaders (Eger and Valdez 2014; 2019) further complicates the equation by shifting the political balance towards the right, at the expense of both the center and the traditional far right.

In view of recent developments in Italy and Sweden (Blombäck 2022; Plescia and Marini 2022), which have seen broad coalitions involving the far right come to power, the potential for a similar alliance at European level seems real. Will the next parliamentary term of the European Parliament (EP) be dominated by a majority ranging from Christian Democrats to ultra-nationalists? What role will the center-right, which will occupy a central position in the future parliament, play within the new coalition dynamics? A related question is that of the reconfiguration of the European political space, which accompanies changes in national party systems and the international geopolitical situation. Will we see a major structured cooperation between nationalists and illiberals at continental level emerge? As the

balance of power shifts to the right, is Europe moving towards a tripartition of the European political space as it materialized in contemporary France, towards a "German-style" centrist compromise, or towards a normalization of relations between centrists and nationalists following the precedent set by Meloni's Italy?

This working paper will address these issues in three steps. In the first part, we present the key electoral trends for the main European political families during the last legislature: the decline of the "cordon sanitaire" (Ripoll Servent 2019) between the center and the right; the rising influence of national-conservative forces; and the crisis of centrism. The second part analyzes the likely balance of power in the future European Parliament, based on the latest opinion polls. Based on this analysis, three main scenarios emerge: a broad nationalist coalition staying in opposition while center-left and center-right parties keep governing through compromise ("Merkel scenario"); a national-liberal alliance ("Kristersson scenario"); and a new model of collaboration between Christian Democratic and National Conservative forces, leading to a weakening of the left's influence in parliament without complete union with the far right ("Meloni scenario"). Finally, the last part of this note highlights the decisive role that German conservatives and the liberal Renew group are likely to play in arbitrating between these three political configurations.

2. EUROPEAN RIGHT-OF-CENTER PARTIES: A POLITICAL AND ELECTORAL STATE OF AFFAIRS

To analyze European political dynamics, we follow

1 — In the following text, references to national political parties use the following notation: "Party name^{XX} (Group)" where XX is the two-letter code of the member state and Group is the acronym of the party's group in the European Parliament. For example, CDU^{DE} (EPP) corresponds to the German CDU, a member of the European People's Party.

the conventional approach of classifying parties according to their group membership in the European Parliament (Ahrens et al. 2022). We first give a brief overview of the composition of these political groups during the current EP term (2.1), as well as their voting behavior within the EP (2.2). We then outline the evolution of their electoral performance in 2022 and 2023 (2.3). Finally, we describe three key trends in the evolution of the European center-right since 2019 (2.4).

2.1. Center-right and right-wing groups in the European Parliament

The European Parliament consists of 705 MEPs, elected by direct universal suffrage since 1979. MEPs are elected on the basis of regional or national constituencies for a 5-year term. While political campaigns are essentially national (Magnette 2017), the Parliament's internal functioning is structured around transnational political groups bringing together a large number of national (or regional) parties generally sharing a common ideological or strategic orientation. Some of these national parties are affiliated to European parties, which in turn form the core of a parliamentary group. Four of the European Parliament's seven groups bring together the bulk of Europe's center-right, right-wing and far-right political forces. In the rest of this section, we introduce each of these groups, giving a brief history and summary of their composition and ideological orientation.

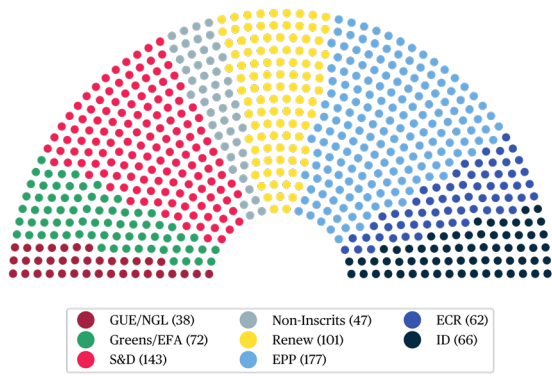
The Renew Europe (RE) group is the parliamentary group of liberals and centrists in the European Parliament. It is characterized by its pro-Europeanism, a form of social liberalism and a desire to deepen European integration (Renew 2019). The Renew group in its current form was created following the 2019 European election, succeeding the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) group (Ahrens and Kantola 2022). This group gathers centrist, democratic and liberal national political parties, some of which are members of two European parties: the liberal ALDE party and the centrist European Democratic Party (EDP). The name change from ALDE to "Renew Europe" in 2019 reflects the growing influence of the French non-ALDE MEPs, who no longer wanted to see the word "liberal" in the group's name (Euractiv 2019; Ahrens and Kantola 2022). In the 2019-2023 term, the Renew group finds itself at the center of the Parliament's political equilibria, where it plays a key role mediating between the center-left and the center-right. Despite holding more seats in the EP, the Social Democrats (S&D) and the People's Party (EPP) usually have to rely on Renew votes to form majorities. The Renew group is highly fragmented, with 101 members coming from some forty distinct national parties. It is clearly dominated by members of Emmanuel Macron's Renaissance^{FR} party and its allies, who provide 20 out of 101 MPs. The only other parties to provide at least five MPs are Ciudadanos^{ES} (7 members),

USRRO and its REPER^{RO} split (7 members), VVD^{NL} (5 members), FDP^{DE} (5 members) and ANOCZ (5 members).

The Group of the European People's Party (EPP) is the Conservatives and Christian Democratic group in the EP. It grew out of the European People's Party and European Democrats group that existed during the sixth parliamentary term (2004-2009), with the Conservative Party^{UK} and ODS^{CZ} forming an autonomous new group, the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR). The EPP's members are mostly Christian Democrat and Conservative forces. The EPP is the largest political group in terms of elected representatives, with 177 MEPs from all 27 EU member states. Its biggest members by number of seats are the CDU^{DE} with 28 MEPs, the Civic Platform^{PL} with 18 MEPs, the PP^{ES} with 16 MEPs, and LR^{FR} with 16 MEPs.

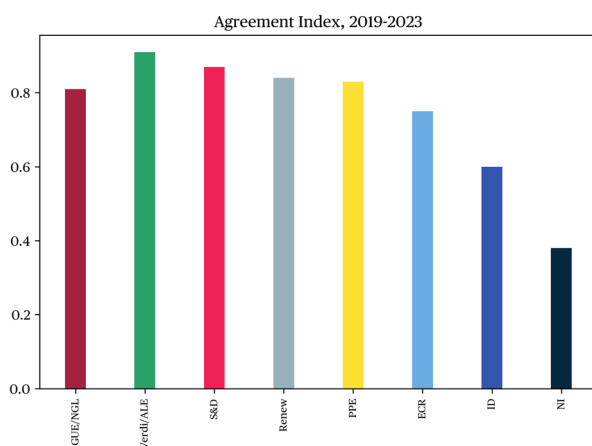
The European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group is a right-wing, anti-federalist group in the European Parliament. The history of this group is linked to the EPP: following the 2009 European elections and the sixth term of the European Parliament, ConservativesUK and ODS^{CZ} decided to break away from the EPP and create their own group. The group's ideological orientation has been described as national-conservative, eurosceptic and anti-federalist. The ECR defend a position on European issues which they define as "euro-realist" (Steven and Szczerbiak 2022) (i.e. a form of cooperation that does not involve federalism). The group has 66 elected members, making it the fifth largest group in the Parliament. The group is clearly dominated by the PiS^{PL} with 24 elected members, followed by the Fdi^{IT} with 9 and the ODS^{CZ} and Vox^{ES} with 4 members each.

The Identity and Democracy (ID) group is the right-wing nationalist and far-right group in the European Parliament. The group follows in the footsteps of the Movement for a Europe of Nations and Freedoms launched in 2014 by bringing together far-right national political parties. For the 2019 European elections, an electoral coalition was formed between some of the Movements' members and like-minded far-right parties (McDonnell and Werner 2020). The group is characterized by a eurosceptic, nationalist, populist and anti-immigration ideology. It has 62 MEPs, making it the EP's sixth largest group. It is dominated by two national parties: the Rassemblement national^{FR} with 18 MEPs, and the Lega^{IT} with 25. The third largest party is the AfD^{DE}, with 9 MEPs.



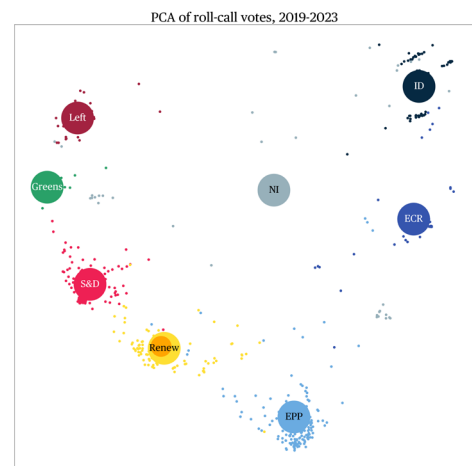
2.2. Voting behavior of political groups in the EP

How do groups in the European Parliament vote, and with whom do they vote most? To quantify the coherence of intra-group voting behavior on the one hand, and the similarity between the various groups' voting patterns on the other, we use two indicators: the agreement index of each political group (Hix et al. 2005; Hix and Noury 2009), and a principal component analysis (PCA) of the roll-call votes during the 2019-2024 term.² For most groups, the agreement index is very high, suggesting that voting discipline is generally respected. This is also indicative of internal discussions and negotiations prior to the vote, depending on the issues at stake. During the 2019-2024 mandate, the Social Democrats (S&D) and the EPP's agreement indices were high, at 87% and 83% respectively. The same was true of the Renew group (84%), the radical left-wing GUE/NGL group (81%), and the ecologist and regionalist parties united in the Greens/EFA group (91%). Among the other political groups, the agreement indices are lower: for the European Conservative Reformists (ECR), they only reach 75%, and for the Identity and Democracy (ID) group, 60%. Unsurprisingly, the Non-inscrit (non-attached) members have the lowest cohesion, at just 38%.



A principal component analysis (PCA) can be used to observe the similarity in voting patterns between groups and between MPs. Here, we perform a two-dimensional PCA. The y-axis, which explains 19% of total variance, mostly indicates MPs' position on a right-left axis: a high value on this axis corresponds to a "left-wing" position on economic issues, a low value to "right-wing" positions. In the case of the European Parliament, the data suggest that this axis partly overlaps with that of foreign and defense policy, particularly on the question of Atlanticism and the vision of international relations. The x-axis, which explains 33% of the total variance, corresponds to the position of parliamentary groups on the GAL-TAN axis (Green/alternative/libertarian - traditional/authoritarian/nationalist, cf. Hooghe et al. 2002). The further left the groups are, the more "libertarian" they are. In the current legislature of the European Parliament, the GAL-TAN axis explains almost twice as much of the variation in votes as the right-left axis.

The orange dot on the PCA corresponds to the majority for every vote. Its position, very close to that of the Renew group, which occupies a median position in the EP, confirms the Liberals' central role in a context of "Grand coalitions." This position is also consistent with coalition theory (see below). Importantly, the three centrist groups S&D, Renew and PPE collaborate more frequently with left-wing than with right-wing parties; consequently, the distance between the parliament's majority (orange dot) and the vote of the ID and CRE groups is larger than the distance between the majority and the vote of the Greens/EFA and GUE/NGL groups.



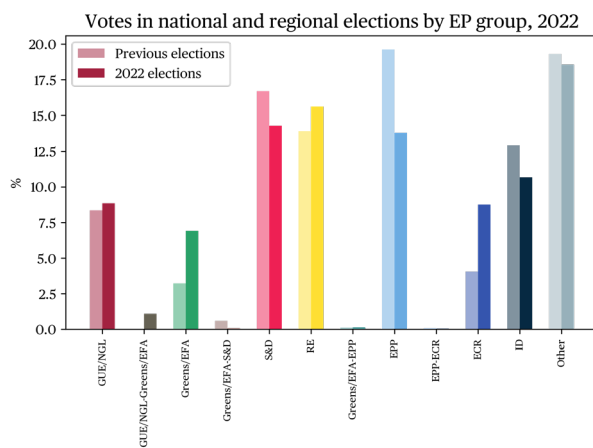
2.3. Election trends, 2022-2023

Several observations can be made regarding recent

2 — The data is from the VoteWatch dataset (Hix et al. 2022) for the period 2019-June 2022, supplemented by our own analysis of the EP's raw data on roll-call votes for the period June 2022-May 2023.

electoral trends. Here, we rely on data collected by the *Electoral Bulletin of the European Union* (BLUE 2023). These estimate the number of votes lost or won by national political parties in regional and national elections, aggregated by European political groups.

For the year 2022, an overall aggregate indicator can be computed. Between January and December 2022, the number of votes won by parties belonging to the two largest groups in the European Parliament (S&D and EPP) has decreased with respect to previous elections. The phenomenon is particularly striking for the EPP, which has fallen from 20% to just under 14% of the vote, a loss of -5.8 pp mainly due to very poor electoral performance in national elections in France and Italy. The S&D suffered a relatively smaller decline (-2.4 pp). The far-right ID group also loses a small share of its votes compared to previous elections (-2.3 pp). The GUE/NGL (+ 0.5 pp), Greens/EFA (+ 3.7 pp) and CRE (+ 4.7 pp) groups, on the other hand, saw their share of the vote increase. The trend is particularly marked for the Greens and Conservatives, who benefit from significant transfers of votes from traditional center-left and center-right parties. The Liberals achieved a mixed result; while their vote share is technically raising, this is mainly due to the peculiarities of some electoral systems (notably in the context of multi-round elections in France) hiding the downward trend experienced by several key political parties (see below).



The results of electoral contests held the first half of 2023 partially confirm these trends. The Spanish regional elections saw a marked increase in the vote share of VoxES (CRE) and the disappearance of CiudadanosES (RE) from all regional parliaments. Unlike in 2022, however, the other right-wing groups experience a clear rebound: against a backdrop of dissatisfaction with federal policies and a rising inflation, the AfDDE (ID) and FPÖAT (ID) recorded significant gains. The CDUDE (EPP) also strengthened its positions, while NDGR (EPP) and GERBBG (EPP) turned out first in first place in important parliamentary votes. Finally, in the Netherlands, a new agrarian and protest party, the BBBNL

(BoerBurgerBeweging, "peasant-citizen movement"), triumphed in provincial elections that saw a collapse in the vote share of Mark Rutte's center-right VVDNL (RE).

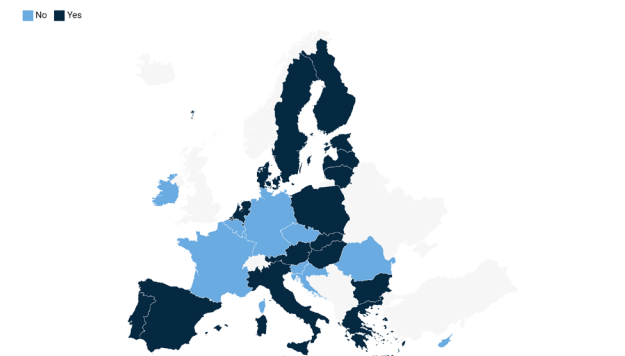
2.4. Three key trends

2.4.1. The decline of the "cordon sanitaire"

The concept of the "cordon sanitaire" emerged in Belgium in the late 1980s in response to the rise of the far-right Vlaams BlokBE (now Vlaams BelangBE) party in the country's Flanders region (Biard 2021; Damen 2001). Faced with the VB's nationalist and xenophobic rhetoric, Belgium's centrist parties decided to establish a "cordon sanitaire" around the party. The basic idea was to reject any cooperation, coalition, or agreement with the VB, which was seen as a threat to Belgium's democracy and fundamental values (Biard 2021). Subsequently, the term was applied to other political systems where similar far-right parties gained popularity (see, e.g., Axelsen 2023; Downs 2001; 2012; Riera 2022). In 2019, the centrist parties in the EP employed a cordon sanitaire strategy to block the appointment of radical EU-skeptic parties and personalities to key offices. This mainly affected ID members, but also a few prominent ECR members such as former Polish Prime Minister Beata Szydło (Ripoll Servent 2019).

At the European level, the cordon sanitaire currently appears to be in decline as a strategy to isolate far-right parties. Recent political trends in several European countries demonstrate an increasing willingness of centrist parties to cooperate, and even govern, with far-right allies. e

Involvement of right-wing nationalist parties in (national or regional) majorities since the 1990s



Two major political developments from 2022 showcase this trend. On October 22, the new Italian government led by Giorgia Meloni (FdIT) was sworn in. Its parliamentary majority consists of more than two-thirds of members of two right-wing nationalist parties: the national-conservative post-fascist FdIT (EKR) and the right-wing populist LegaIT (ID). Suffering an electoral counter-performance, Silvio Berlusconi's center-right FIIT (EPP) could only join

the government as a junior partner, a role in which it was supposed to strengthen the cabinet's credibility vis-à-vis the EU. FI^{IT} vice-president Antonio Tajani, who served as EP President between 2017 and 2019, was appointed Foreign Minister of the new government. Not only did the cordon sanitaire (once again) not apply in Italy, but the election brought about the first alliance of center-right and right-wing nationalist parties in recent history dominated by right-wing parties (Plescia et Marini 2022).

Less than a week before the Meloni cabinet was sworn in, on October 14, 2022, an intergovernmental agreement was signed at Tidö Castle in central Sweden which sealed the end of the longstanding cordon sanitaire in Sweden. The new liberal-conservative coalition around Ulf Kristersson, consisting of Moderaterna (M^{SE}, EPP), Liberalerna (LSE, RE) and Kristdemokraterna (KD^{SE}, EPP), decided on a parliamentary alliance with the right-wing nationalist Sverigedemokraterna (SD^{SE}, EPP). Despite not formally being part of the government, the SD^{SE} were able to impose their agenda in several important policy areas, including migration (Blombäck 2022).

A year ahead of the 2024 European election, the cordon sanitaire remains in place in only eleven of the 27 EU member states. These eleven states include the founding members Belgium, Luxembourg, France and Germany on the one hand, and Ireland, the Czech Republic, Romania, Slovenia, Croatia, Malta and Cyprus on the other, with no right-wing nationalist party being represented in the national parliaments of Ireland and Malta. In all other EU member-states, governments involving right-wing nationalist parties have formed at the national or regional level since the 1990s. Four cases can be distinguished in this regard. In a first group of member-states, governments involving the far-right emerged only in the recent past, such as in Estonia under the Ratas II cabinet (2019-2021) or in Finland under the Sipilä cabinet (2015-2019). In a second group of states that includes Latvia³, Poland⁴, or Italy⁵, right-wing nationalist parties have regularly participated in (national) government coalitions. In a third group of states, the participation of right-wing nationalist parties in government has so far been confined to the regional level; this includes Spain, where Vox^{ES} is involved in various regional governments.⁶ Finally, in a fourth group of states, right-wing nationalist parties never formed part of the cabinet, however the cabinet still

depended on their support in parliament (this was the case of, e.g., the minority government of the Rutte I cabinet in the Netherlands, which was tolerated by the PVV^{NL}).

Following the new government alliances of conservative and right-wing nationalist parties in Scandinavia as well as on the Iberian Peninsula, the cordon sanitaire is now limited to a few Central European countries as well as France. Moreover, there are signs of the cordon sanitaire weakening in some of these countries. In the Czech Republic, government agreements were signed at the municipality level between ANO^{CZ} (RE) and SPD^{CZ} (ID) following the 2022 local elections (Šamanová 2023). Similarly, in the French National Assembly in 2022, two vice-presidential candidates from the RN^{FR} (ID) were able to prevail over their left-wing opponents with the support of votes from the center-right parties (Le Monde 2022).

2.4.2. The rise of a new national-conservative right

The rise of a new national-conservative right in the European Parliament, represented by the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), is a consequence of a more general trend at European level. In its current lineup, the ECR parliamentary group consists of both neo-nationalist movements of the "new generation," which celebrated their first major electoral successes after 2010 and generally seek with the center-right, such as Vox^{ES}, the FdI^{IT} and SD^{SE}, and established Central European parties of right-wing conservative orientation, such as PiS^{PL} and ODS^{CZ}.

In the 2009 Prague Declaration, in which the ECR set out their principles and values, the grouping defined itself first and foremost in terms of so-called "Eurorealism," which had previously been used in the early 2000s by British conservatives led by David Cameron to redefine the party's position on European integration. "Eurorealism" is understood to mean an anti-federalist vision of European integration in which national parliaments are to be strengthened in European decision-making processes through a stricter application of to the principle of subsidiarity (Leruth 2016). In the ECR's view, this presupposes more pragmatic and flexible approaches to European cooperation that respect national differences and emphasize member states' sovereignty. This approach cannot be reduced to mere "Euroscepticism"

3 — Šķēle I-II, Krasts I, Krištopans I, Šķēle III, Bērziņš I, Repše I, Kalvītis II, Godmanis I, Dombrovskis I-III, Straujuma I-II, Kučinskis I, Kariņš I-II.

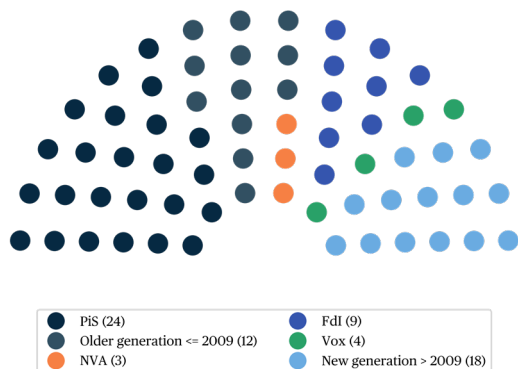
4 — Berlusconi I, Dini I, Berlusconi II-III, Conte I, Draghi I, Meloni I.

5 — Marcinkiewicz I, Kaczyński I, Szydło I, Morawiecki I-II.

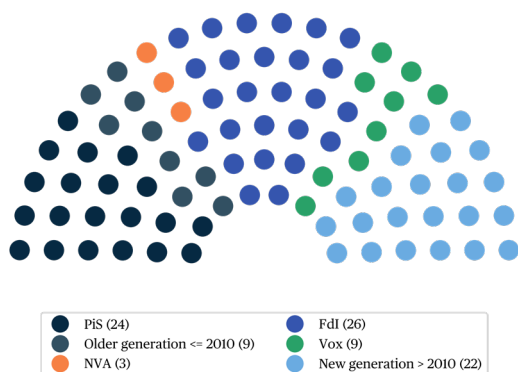
6 — Une participation de Vox^{ES} à un gouvernement mené par le PP^{ES} est très probable en cas de victoire de la droite aux élections générales de juillet 2023.

since, while the focus is on the absolute need for reform of the existing institutional framework, support and participation in European institutions and the integration process are also emphasized (Leruth 2016).

Composition of the ECR group (15 June 2023)



Composition of the ECR group (2024, estimate)



Despite their renunciation of Euroscepticism, the ECR member parties clearly profess a nationalist ideology. The emphasis on nationalist elements characterizes the new generation of the European right as it emerged after the 1980s. In this context, identitarian discourses and an emphasis on "law and order" issues have increasingly supplanted classic "extreme right" positions on economic issues (Eger et Valdez 2019).

Another characteristic of the ECR is their Atlanticism. In the European Parliament, the ECR are considered the most pro-American group (Steven & Szczerbiak 2022). The proximity to the American Republican Party, an official "global partner" of the ECR, is to be noted. For example, an ECR delegation annually attends the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), the largest political conference of American conservatives, whose 2023 edition featured speakers such as Donald Trump, Steven Bannon and Marjorie Taylor Greene (Guarino 2023).

In terms of economic policy, the ECR adopts mostly market-liberal positions, emphasizes the importance of individual freedom, and is skeptical of

excessive market regulation (Steven, Szczerbiak 2022). Czech MEP Jan Zahradil, for example, spoke of a "Thatcherite/'Reagonomics' approach to public economic affairs (Steven, Szczerbiak 2022). Thus, in this respect too, the ECR is stepping into a hitherto unfilled gap between Christian Democrats and classical far-right parties: While the EPP defends the ideal of a free yet regulated market and has contributed to developing the so-called "European social model" for decades, the ID group placed little value of putting forward a distinctive economic and financial agenda, given the dominance of the migration issue in its political communication (Steven, Szczerbiak 2022). By using the concept of "Eurorealism" to combine the aversion of conservative Europeans vis-à-vis an ever closer union with support for economic aspects of European integration and Atlanticism - two features typical of Europe's right-of-center parties -, the ECR occupy a unique segment in the European party landscape (Steven, Szczerbiak 2022)

Through this novel positioning, the new national conservative right in the European Parliament is challenging traditional parties. Their willingness to work with centrist parties to avoid political isolation gives them a strategic position to influence decision making at the European level (Leruth 2016). The electoral trends described in the previous part suggest a strengthening of the ECR member parties, driven especially by the "new generation." The recent electoral success of the FdIIT, VoxES, or SDSE, and the gain of new members such as ELGR, give the group a unique dynamism among all European right-of-center political families. After the next European election, the ECR group could reach a size that far exceeds that of previous conservative and right-wing nationalist EP groups (see next part).

2.4.3. The crisis of centrism

In stark contrast to the upward trend of the right-wing conservatives, the forces of the political center in Europe are experiencing turbulent times. The four national parties with the largest number of seats in the Renew Group are struggling with a decline in their poll ratings, which in some cases has been drastic.

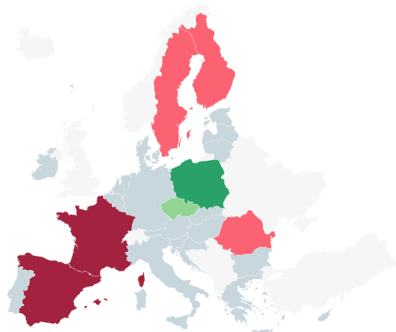
French President Emmanuel Macron's RenaissanceFR party and its allies (currently totaling around 20 seats) lost their majority in the National Assembly following the June 2022 parliamentary election, despite Macron being reelected three months earlier (Taiclet 2022). Since then, a minority cabinet has governed in Paris, pushing through its most recent pension reform without parliamentary approval. The president's popularity ratings are now only 30 percent. In a virtual direct confrontation with Marine Le Pen (RN^{FR}, ID), polls predict that the latter would prevail by a margin of up to 10 percentage points(!). For Ciudadanos^{ES} (currently 7 seats), the situation is

even more dramatic. After the party had gained a foothold in most Spanish regions between 2015 and 2019, a rapid decline in votes followed from 2019 onward. This development was probably triggered by the party's decision to move further to the right from its original position in the center of the political spectrum by pursuing a policy of exclusive cooperation with the PP^{ES} (EPP) and Vox^{ES} (ECR). In the meantime, Ciudadanos have disappeared from all of Spain's regional parliaments. A loss of all remaining mandates in the next parliamentary elections in July 2024 is foreseeable. The third-largest party in the group, the USR^{RO}, is also facing domestic political and internal crises. After promising election results in 2020, the young party, which emphasized a strong reform and anti-corruption agenda, entered into a coalition with the PNL^{RO} (EPP) and the UDMR^{RO} (EPP). However, the coalition broke up in September 2021 after barely 10 months in office when the USR refused to support an investment plan proposed by the PNL, which it criticized as vulnerable to corruption. The USR then went into opposition. In 2022, a split took place due to tensions within the party leadership, with former Prime Minister and Renew chairman Dacian Cioloș founding the new REPER^{RO} party with 4 other MEPs.

The fourth-largest force in the Renew parliamentary group, the FDP^{DE}, entered a center-left coalition with SPD^{DE} (S&D) and the Greens^{DE} in 2022 after a successful election campaign. Since then, its poll ratings have been steadily declining. They currently stand at just 8%. Although recent negative trends should have little effect on the composition of the RE group given the FDP's poor performance in the last EP election (5.4%), the party's situation is clearly precarious. In selecting potential coalition partners, liberal forces in Europe are increasingly experiencing strategic dilemmas. On the one hand, forging alliances left of the center has become more difficult in a context of growing polarization, but also in view of the shift of political balances to the right. On the other hand, the case of the Swedish and Spanish liberals proves that cooperation with right-wing parties can also lead to serious losses. If a vote for renewing the Swedish Riksdag were to be held in June 2023, the Liberalerna^{SE} would no longer obtain any seats.

Projected change in the number of seats of the Renew group, 2023-2024

■ < -5 ■ -5--1 ■ -1-2 ■ 2-5 ■ ≥ 5



Finally, another destabilizing factor for the Renew parliamentary group lies in some of the current or future members of the group mobilizing a populist or Euroskeptical discourse. The most prominent example of such a strategy is that of the ANO^{CZ} party led by entrepreneur and former president Andrej Babiš, currently at an all-time high with over 30% in the polls. The party has shown willingness to cooperate with far-right movements in the past. The LA^{DK}, the FF^{IE} and the ZZS^{LV}, which are currently achieving good performance in the polls, also belong to the right wing of the group. The TDPL electoral alliance of former TV presenter Szymon Hołownia and the centrist alliance Azione-Italia VivaIT around ex-Prime Minister Matteo Renzi (formerly PD^{IT}, S&D) may be genuinely centrist forces, they are also hard-to-classify parties that hold a rather fragile position in domestic politics.

Overall, the situation of centrist forces in the Renew group is characterized by a twofold challenge. On the one hand, the current largest parties in the group are experiencing a clear downward trend, accompanied by difficulties in selecting potential coalition partners. On the other hand, the balance of power within an already fragmented parliamentary group is shifting in favor of parties whose positions and ethos differ most from the classic approaches of the ALDE party core. This makes the group particularly vulnerable to a loss of cohesion and voting discipline, and could jeopardize its bargaining position in the next European legislature.

3. LA DROITE APRÈS LES ÉLECTIONS EUROPÉENNES DE 2024

What will the political balance in Europe look like following the European election on June 6-9, 2024? What will be the consequences for right-of-center parties in terms of both internal reconfiguration and coalition strategies? We first present the political equilibria that are likely to arise within the EU's two main legislative bodies in the light of the latest opinion polls (3.1). We then describe the various scenarios that can be envisaged regarding the rearrangement of the European center-right and right-wing groups (3.2) and coalitions within the institutions (3.3).

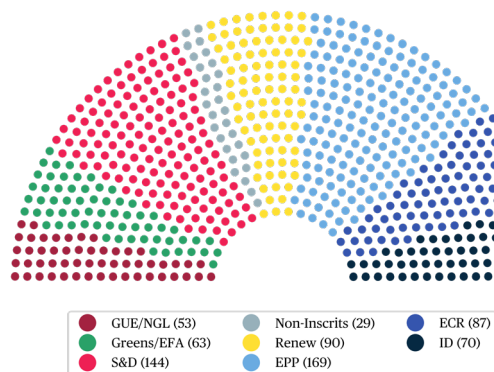
3.1. Political equilibria

3.1.1. European Parliament

The poll aggregators on the June 2024 election confirm the major trends observed at national and regional level during the past sequence. The current composition of parliament and the one predicted by the EuropeElects

meta-survey of May 31, 2023, adjusted by our own calculations⁷ (Garscha and van Laenen 2023), are presented below.

European Parliament 2024 (base: EuropeElects estimate, May 2023)



According to this projection, the GUE/NGL group would obtain 53 seats, up 13 seats compared to the 2019⁸ election result, while the other two center-left groups would see their number of mandates fall, with 63 seats (-4) for the Greens/EFA and 144 seats (-4) for the S&D. The Renew Liberals and Christian Democrats would also lose 7 and 18 seats respectively, obtaining 90 and 169 mandates. The ID group would get 70 seats (-6), while the ECR group would increase its parliamentary weight by 50%, from 62 to 87 seats (+25). Even in the most pessimistic hypothesis concerning the inclusion of unaffiliated members, the ECR would gain at least 20 seats.

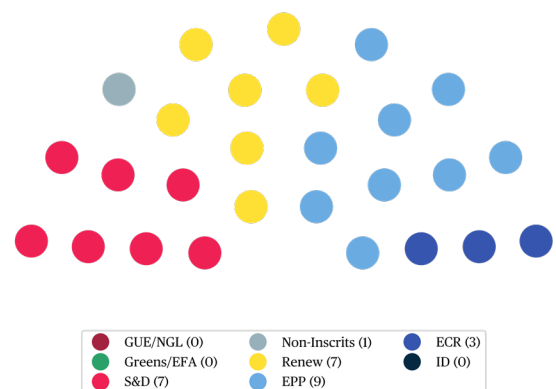
These projections show a parliament with a historically low share of Social Democratic (20%) and Christian Democratic (24%) members, coupled with a record score since 1990 for the radical left (8%) and the Conservatives (14%). Right-of-center groups (without the Liberals) would make up 48% of parliament, outperforming the record set by the first parliament in 1979 (47%). In line with the downward trend experienced by European centrist parties in recent years (Gidron 2019; Nachtwey 2019; Schäfer and Zürn 2021), the S&D, Renew and EPP groups would win just 57% of seats, while it still controlled 76% of the parliament in 2004. The results of the forthcoming European elections are thus likely to confirm an increase in polarization, a shift to the right and a weakening of the three centrist groups of

the Grand coalition - three trends already observed in the 2019 elections (Mudde 2019; Ripoll Servent 2019).

3.1.2. Council of the European Union

Unlike that of the European Parliament, the power balance in the Council of the European Union evolves continuously as national majorities change. By the summer of 2024, few seats are expected to change hands.⁹ Among the national elections scheduled over the summer of 2023, only the Spanish, Slovakian and Polish general elections are likely to lead to a major political changeover. In Spain, the minority government of the PSOE^{ES} (S&D) and Podemos^{ES} (GUE/NGL) could be replaced by a right-wing executive comprising the PP^{ES} (EPP) and Vox^{ES} (ECR). In Slovakia, SMER-SD^{SK} (S&D), Hlas^{SK} (S&D) and PS^{SK} (RE), currently in opposition, score better in the polls than all the parties of the former center-right and far-right majority. Various models for coalitions in the center appear conceivable. Finally, in Poland, Donald Tusk's pro-European center-right coalition (KO^{PL}, EPP/RE/Greens) is a serious contender for the illiberal right-wing majority of the PiS^{PL} (CRE), currently credited with only around 36% of the vote. The third place, however, could be occupied by the Konfederacja^{PL} (NI, extreme right), which would thus hold a key position at national level. A slight shift to the right in the balance of power within the Council appears plausible, though not guaranteed. However, the scores of Vox^{ES} and PiS^{PL} in national elections could prove decisive in determining the balance between the EPP and ECR during the coming term.

EU Heads of Government (2024, estimate)



7 — In order to limit the number of unaffiliated members in the final projection, some parties marked as unaffiliated in the original survey were assigned the group that appeared most likely to be present in the new parliament. Therefore, the Vazrazhdane^{BG} and ELAM^{CY} parties are counted with the ID group; Danmarksdemokraterne^{DK} and Reconquête^{FR} with the CRE group; the M5S^{IT} with the Greens/EFA; and BBB^{NL} with the EPP. In the case of M5S^{IT}, which is currently unaffiliated, we chose the group displaying the voting behavior closest to its own in the previous parliamentary term, and with which discussions are already underway. For the other parties, the allocation was made on the basis of ideological proximity and media coverage.

8 — Post-Brexit seats. The number of seats obtained following the election differs slightly from the current composition of the groups.

9 — GR, ES, SK, LU, PL, BE.

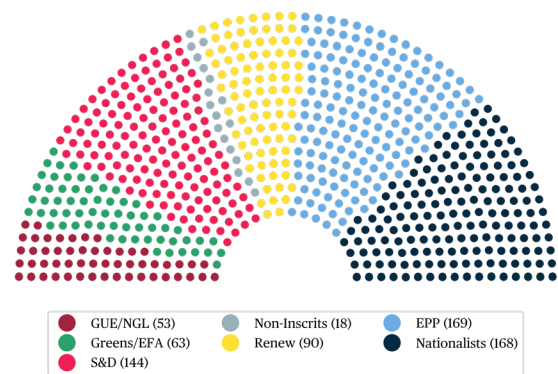
3.2. The reordering of right-wing groups in the EP

The likely evolution of the political equilibria within the European center-right is characterized by an increase in the influence of the ECR at the expense of the more centrist forces and the traditional far-right. In numerical terms, the bloc made up of the ECR and ID groups, as well as parties close to these two groups (e.g. Fidesz^{HU}), is likely to be on a par with the EPP after the next European elections, while the ECR could overtake RE in terms of number of seats. The trend appears to favor the nationalist formations in both groups. Between the ECR and ID, the ideological proximity is real, and the division into two camps is mainly the result of leadership conflicts and historical legacy (McDonnell and Werner 2020). Could the ECR and ID groups merge de jure or de facto into a "nationalist supergroup" capable of becoming the leading political force at European level?

3.2.1. Will the Nationalists be the largest political group in the next parliament?

The idea of a grand European nationalist alliance has been raised repeatedly during the last parliamentary term. In the run-up to the 2019 elections, Matteo Salvini (Lega^{IT}) had already attempted to set up such an alliance, but his initiative had failed to convince the PiS^{PL} and the SDSE, not least because of his stance on Russia. In the end, the operation led to the creation of the ID group, an enlarged version of the ENF group of the previous term and the largest far-right group in the history of the European Parliament (McDonnell and Werner 2020). In light of this partial success, the ID leaders did not abandon the idea of a unified nationalist group. In July 2021, in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe, around fifteen European leaders gathered around Marine Le Pen signed a "Declaration on the Future of Europe" calling for reform of the Union under a sovereignist and nationalist agenda (Soldwitsch 2022). The initiative brings together all the major forces of the nationalist right, including members of ID (RN^{FR}, Lega^{IT}, FPÖ^{AT}, VB^{BE}, DF^{DK}, EKRE^{EE}, PS^{FI}), the CRE (Vox^{ES}, PiS^{PL}, Fdi^{IT}, LLRA^{LV}, EL^{GR}) or the Non-inscrits (Fidesz^{HU}), and signals the adoption of a new strategy of influence seeking to transform the Union from within rather than pursuing a strategy of exit (Soldwitsch 2022). In December of the same year, the "Warsaw Summit" attended by Le Pen, Morawiecki and Orbán endorsed the principle of increased cooperation between nationalist parties on an anti-federalist and conservative platform (Kucharzyk 2021).

Scenario: Unified nationalist group



But, beyond the common strategy laid down in the 2021 Declaration, the ability of the nationalist parties to forge a real common project remains limited (Soldwitsch 2022). Above all, since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the rift between the two groups is now back in the foreground. The issue of relations with Russia had been purposefully downplayed by representatives of both groups just a few months earlier (Kucharzyk 2021). The older generation of Western European nationalists, long close to the Putin regime (Klapsis 2015; Polyakova 2017)¹⁰, stands here in stark contrast to the new generation of Atlanticist formations and Eastern European anti-communists, now directly inspired by Trump-era conservatism. As a sign of this division, the PerussuomalaisetFI (PS) left the ID group in 2023 to join the ECR group (Camut 2023). In this context, the initiative launched by Marine Le Pen seems doomed (Guillou 2023), despite the domestic success of the RN^{FR}, FPÖ^{AT}, AfD^{DE} and EKRE^{EE}.

Since 2019, the balance of power between the ECR and ID has reversed. Any broad right-wing alliance to be forged in the next term is likely to be led by ECR leaders, including Meloni, Abascal (Vox^{ES}) and Morawiecki. The ECR group could try to attract some of ID's current members into its orbit and benefit from the weakening of the remaining members. Together, these parties could then form an enlarged group of up to 120 members, the third-largest in the parliament behind the EPP and S&D.

3.2.2. Atlantic neo-nationalists versus the old guard of the European far right, or the benefits of division

A clear decoupling between the two main branches of contemporary European nationalism constitutes the second main hypothesis for the evolution of the European Right. In this scenario, already discussed

10 — The current position of ID member parties on these issues varies. While the main leaders of the RN^{FR}, VB^{BE}, Lega^{IT} and AfD^{DE} have officially amended their position, the FPÖ^{AT} still refuses to take sides with any of the parties to the conflict.

in the aftermath of the 2019 election, the strengthening of "trans-national nationalism" would not be accompanied by the formation of a single radical right-wing group (McDonnell and Werner 2020).

Such a scenario appears beneficial to the ECRs insofar as, as the Spanish, Italian and Swedish cases show, they intend to acquire executive responsibilities by forming coalitions with traditional center-right parties. To overcome the reluctance of moderate right-wing forces, most of whom are very Atlanticist, these parties could seek to distance themselves from parties with overtly pro-Russian allegiances. In an office-seeking perspective (Strøm and Muller 1999), the ECRs have a clear interest in increasing their respectability by limiting cooperation with the most controversial parties of the far-right. In a policy-seeking perspective, this strategy appears to be relatively inexpensive, since the experience of past legislatures shows that the votes of the ID group can join those of the ECR and the EPP on issues where the visions of these parties converge, which should be the case, for example, on cultural or identity-related issues. The data shows that, while the positions of the ECR and ID groups on the Russo-Ukrainian war diverge, their convergence on the rule of law issue has been unaffected by the war (Holesch and Zagórski 2023). Finally, the very limited media exposure of EP group dynamics suggests that the effect of the choice of a political group on the electoral performance of the parties should be relatively modest (vote-seeking).

In any case, for the political parties in the ID group - and, perhaps, FideszHU - the coming legislature will be marked by a relative loss of influence. While the absence of a joint group may frustrate the ambitions of ID those parties that are most powerful at home, such as the RN^{FR}, it will only have a limited effect on its electoral performance. The relative freedom of action gained from being in opposition may also benefit its members both nationally and in Parliament.

3.3. Who will the center-right govern with? Reviewing coalition scenarios

The various coalitions formed by groups in the European Parliament on different sets of issues shape the EU's policies (Hix and Høyland 2013). In this section, we seek to assess the consequences of the electoral developments described above for future coalitions within the Parliament. We begin by reviewing the specific features of coalitions in

the European Parliament (3.3.1). We then analyze current coalition configurations and possible future coalitions following the 2024 election (3.3.2). On the basis of these configurations, three scenarios are proposed, one of which relies on the continuation of a centrist "Grand coalition" model, while the other two are based respectively on an Atlanticist national-liberal alliance and on a full-fledged alliance of center-right and far-right parties (3.3.3).

3.3.1. What is a coalition in the European Parliament?

The classical notion of a "coalition" is rooted in majoritarian parliamentary democracy (Lijphart 1999).¹¹ In this model, parties represented in parliament are divided between a parliamentary alliance controlling the executive (the governing party or "government coalition") and a minority without executive responsibilities playing the role of opposition. However, European politics tends to follow a consociative, rather than majoritarian, model (Costa and Magnette 2003; Gabel 1998; Lijphart 1969; 1999; Piattoni 2019), and its specific regime of separation of powers and selection of the executive (the Commission) differs from that of a classical parliamentary system (Hix et al. 2005). The practice of power-sharing between member states and political groups on the one hand, the superimposition of national and ideological cleavages on the other, do away with any binary division between majority and opposition. As a result, parliamentary majorities vary from one agenda item to the other: instead of a single coalition dominating for the whole parliamentary term, different coalitions alternate depending on the policy considered (Hix et al. 2005; Kreppel and Tsebelis 1999).

However, the fact that different coalition models alternate does not mean that the possible majority-minority configurations are all equally prevalent. It is in this context that the claim of a "Grand Coalition" of S&D, RE and the EPP dominating the European institutions should be understood (Ripoll Servent 2019). The S&D, RE and EPP groups, which hold most of the posts in the Commission and Council,¹² have established a culture of cooperation within the European institutions. This cooperation has sometimes been formal, as when the 2014 agreement between S&D, ALDE and PPE was signed, but its roots lie in an older consensus-seeking logic (Marié 2019). The three centrist groups are also the most represented within the majorities that emerge, on a case-by-case basis, during votes in the European Parliament, and are those

11 — The German-speaking literature speaks, perhaps more clearly, of a "democracy of competition" (*Konkurrenzdemokratie*) opposed to a "democracy of concordance" (*Konkordanzdemokratie*). See Schmidt (2000).

12 — The only Commissioner affiliated to another political group is currently Janusz Wojciechowski (PiS^{PL}, CRE). The only national governments led by

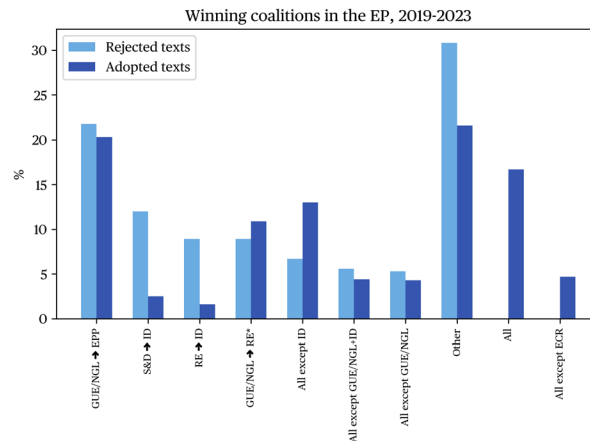
whose preferences are closest to the average outcome of the vote. However, this does not mean that these groups are united on all issues, even the most important ones: the election of Ursula von der Leyen (CDUDE) as head of the executive notably took place against the votes of a non-negligible proportion of the Social Democrats, and with the support of a sizable fraction of the ECR and unaffiliated members (Hublet and Sallard 2019). Groups outside the "Grand Coalition" also frequently join the majority, and are capable of forming alternative majorities on occasion. Whereas in a majoritarian parliamentary democracy, the political equilibria give rise to a majority (or sometimes minority) government coalitions, what is at stake in the European Parliament is rather the relative frequency of different majority configurations.

3.3.2. Coalitions in the EP: a brief state of affairs and perspectives

In the current parliamentary term, the winning coalitions that prevailed in roll-call votes were most often very broad ones. Namely, over all adopted legislative and non-legislative texts, the most frequent winning coalition involves the GUE/NGL, Greens/EFA, S&D, RE and EPP groups together (20% of cases); the second most frequent configuration (17% of cases) brings together a majority of all parliamentary groups, including ID and ECR; the third most frequent coalition (13% of cases) excludes only the ID group. In fourth place comes the first coalition structured along the left-right cleavage: 11% of texts are adopted by a majority combining GUE/NGL, Greens/EFA, S&D and RE, i.e. the left and center against the right and far-right. Among rejected texts, the most frequent winning coalition is the same as above (22% of cases), followed by the coalition of the S&D, RE, EPP, ECR and ID groups (12% of cases). In third place comes the coalition combining the votes of the RE, PPE, CRE and ID groups (9%), and in fourth place the coalition of all left-wing groups together with RE (also 9%). Overall, whenever a text is adopted, the S&D and RE groups have voted with the majority in 93% of the cases, the Greens in 87%, the EPP in 82%, GUE/NGL in 76%, the ECR in 53%, and ID in only 41%.

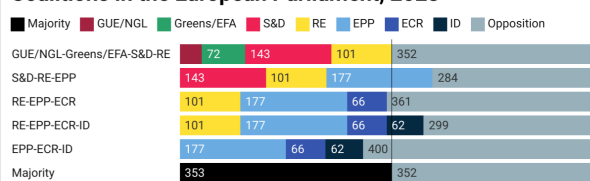
These very high figures for all groups confirm both the high variability of coalitions, the high level of consensus, and the trend towards the existence of a Grand Coalition. They also confirm the greater proximity of left-wing parties (including the radical left GUE/NGL group) to the parliament's center of gravity. In practice, the current European Parliament appears to be dominated by a Grand Coalition centered on the RE group and (partly)

extending by consensus to all left-wing groups. The right-wing nationalist groups CRE and ID, while by far the most isolated, are still able to influence the parliament's functioning: the ECR and ID groups vote in favor of around 50% of the texts adopted, and can form blocking majorities with the center and the right on certain issues.

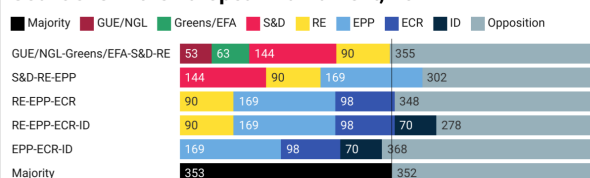


On the basis of the projections described at the start of this section, the "Grand Coalition" is likely to retain a broad majority in the new parliament, with around 57% of seats. However, the EPP's influence in such a configuration is likely to increase. Namely, the alternative center-left coalition of GUE/NGL, Greens/EFA, S&D and RE, which contributed to the adoption of over 10% of texts, is likely to lose their current majority (49.7% of seats versus 50.1%). As a result, the Liberals and the Left will be more dependent on the support of the EPP or on seeking external backing to form winning coalitions.

Coalitions in the European Parliament, 2023



Coalitions in the European Parliament, 2024



The new parliament also sees the strength of a potential EPP-CRE-ID coalition increase, although without

a non-member are the Fiala cabinet (ODS^{CZ}, CRE), the Orbán cabinet (Fidesz^{HU}, NI), the Meloni cabinet (FdI^{IT}, CRE) and the Morawiecki cabinet (PiS^{PL}, CRE).

reaching a majority of seats (from 43% to 48%). As the right has more reserves among the non-attached members and the liberals, this near-majority should be another option for the EPP in the next legislature. Finally, the RE-EPP-CRE coalition would win 51% of the seats, compared with 49% in the current parliament. An agreement between the Liberal, Christian Democratic and national-conservative forces could be enough to outvote the left and center-left parties, without the need for agreements with the traditional far-right.

Because of its central position in the space of political preferences, RE is currently part of all major minimal coalitions, thus playing the role of a core party (Schofield 1993). In a classical parliamentary system, theory predicts that a core party is likely to form a minority government, imposing its positions in parliament through a variety of alliances (Schofield 1993). The data on roll-call votes seems to corroborate this fact (even though the EP does not follow a standard majoritarian approach), with the position of the majority in the current parliament being very close to that of RE.

In the new parliament, the EPP is likely to take over this core party position. The main minimal coalitions still available, i.e. S&D-RE-EPP (Grand Coalition), RE-EPP-CRE (center-right and national-conservatives) and PPE-CRE-ID+ (all right-wing parties and some additional votes) all involve the EPP. It is therefore to be expected that the EPP will be able to impose its positions more easily, which should lead to a policy that is economically more conservative, more Atlanticist, and more right-wing socially and culturally. However, if the center-left succeeds in repeatedly obtaining the few votes needed to form majorities, the result is a configuration without a core party (Schofield 1993). In this case, the average outcome of the parliament's deliberations is more likely to be located between the positions of the RE and the EPP groups. Achieving such a configuration is not out of reach, but will likely depend on the goodwill of the EPP's left wing (see next section).

3.3.3. Grand coalition or right-wing coalition? The Merkel, Kristersson and Meloni scenarios

Within the new parliament, the relative frequency of center-left coalitions on the one hand, and of center-right or right-wing coalitions on the other, can lead to three main scenarios.

In the "Merkel scenario", a kind of cordon sanitaire is maintained at least by the EPP vis-à-vis ID and by Renew vis-à-vis the ECR. Center or center-left coalitions remain the preferred winning coalitions in the European Parliament. Even in this configuration, the EPP retains a stronger bargaining power vis-à-vis its former allies than in the current term, and can increase its influence in parliament.

This is the approach adopted in post-war German politics, where the center-right rules out any alliance with the nationalists. The Grand coalition is maintained indefinitely as the electoral base of far-right parties grows, even if it means accepting an even greater rise in populist sentiment (Hublet and Schleyer 2019; Ripoll Servent 2019).

In the other two scenarios, the center-right instead engages in ongoing collaboration with all or part of the radical right. The two possible variants in the case of the European Parliament are a national-liberal RE-EPP-CRE coalition on the model of Ulf Kristersson's current cabinet (MSE, EPP) and a right-wing alliance of the EPP, CRE and ID groups on the model of the Meloni government.

In the "Kristersson scenario", the ID group remains excluded from any formal or semi-formal cooperation between the parties, thus reducing the reputational risks for the center-right and guaranteeing an Atlanticist line. ID's opposition to the proposals put forward by the EPP and the ECR is accepted, and offset by an opening towards the center. However, such a configuration is likely to have to overcome major resistance from (at least) the left wing of the Renew group - in late 2022, Renew had strongly condemned the participation of LiberalernaSE, a member of the group, in the Kristersson government (Hublet 2022).

In the "Meloni scenario", the center-right and far-right forge majorities together, involving a limited number of liberal and non-attached members. The majority that this scenario mobilizes (associating EPP, ECR and ID) is unlikely to be ever formalized: importing the Italian scheme into the context of the European Parliament would require a far-reaching *aggiornamento* in the positions of the EPP and ECR vis-à-vis ID, which is highly implausible in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war. However, we have seen that coalitions in the European Parliament could easily do without such formal cooperation. A "Meloni scenario" would therefore be more likely to involve an assumed collaboration between the EPP and the CRE, supported by the right wing of RE as well as the ID group. This could lead to a multiplication of right-wing majorities on societal or cultural issues, particularly where the EPP's positions diverge sharply from those of the center-left.

Given the convergence of the ECR and ID groups' positions on a large number of policy issues (Holesch and Zagórski 2023), ID's votes could be relatively easy to obtain in the event of an EPP-ECR agreement. Consequently, the "Meloni scenario", which has the advantage of being open to all right-wingers, appears more flexible and easier to implement than the "Kristersson scenario". The latter could therefore remain confined to issues where ECR and ID strongly disagree and a Grand coalition is unthinkable, while ID would vote with the right-wing parties in most other cases.

In the particular context of the European Parliament, these three scenarios are not mutually exclusive. Which of the two main “Merkel” and “Meloni” scenarios will dominate is likely to depend heavily on the strategy of the two center-right groups. The final part of this paper highlights the key role that German conservatives and liberals will play in this process.

4. THE KEY ROLE OF GERMAN CONSERVATIVES AND THE RENEW GROUP

4.1. Gretchenfrage: the CDU/CSU's central role in orienting coalition dynamics in the EP

The “Merkel scenario” does not take its name by chance; after all, dealing with the Alternative for Germany (AfD) was one of the most dominant issues for the former German chancellor during her last two legislative periods (Oppelland 2018).

In Germany, the CDU/CSU has so far pursued a policy of systematic distancing and refusal to cooperate vis-à-vis the AfD. At the CDU Federal Congress in 2018, the party held firm to exclude any form of cooperation with the AfD. This clear demarcation vis-à-vis the far right is first to be justified by the historical legacy of German postwar politics: the CDU, founded after World War II, sees its responsibility in defending its core values of “freedom, solidarity and justice,” preserving the democratic order and preventing the normalization or legitimization of extremism. Since the CDU perceives the AfD as an “anti-democratic, fascistoid and inhumane party” whose representatives regularly trivialize National Socialism in public, the CDU's official stance can only consist in excluding any coalition or other form of cooperation with the AfD (CDU 2020).

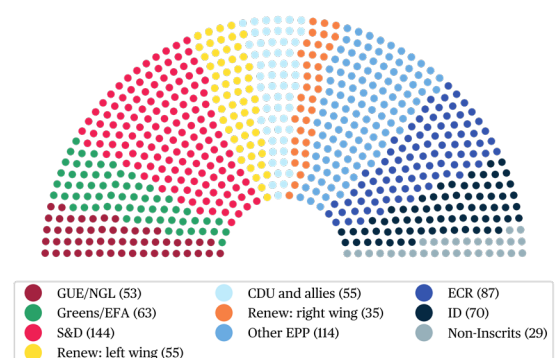
At the European level, too, the CDU seems willing to defend and enforce this line. When a governing alliance of Fratelli d'Italia (EKR), Forza Italia (EPP) and Lega (ID) emerged in Italy after the September 2022 election, EPP leader and CSU politician Manfred Weber met EKR leader and new Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni in Rome to discuss cooperation between their respective groups. The reaction from the CDU followed promptly: although Forza Italia, a sister party of the EPP, was part of the new Italian government, the other two coalition parties represent political positions “that are largely incompatible with the positions of the EPP” in the words Jürgen Hardt, foreign policy spokesman of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group in the Bundestag. Hardt went on to say that “there is no reason for further cooperation with the other parties of the Italian government in the European Parliament as long as they cooperate with openly anti-European forces, such as the German AfD” (Krzysztoższek et al. 2023). In this way, he not only made it clear that an alliance between the ECR and the EPP in

the European Parliament was out of the question from the CDU's point of view, but also directly generalized his party's positions vis-à-vis right-wing nationalist parties to the entire EPP party family. In fact, Weber even faced criticism from within his own Bavarian CSU: Bavarian Prime Minister and CSU leader Markus Söder promised to decidedly oppose “neo-fascist groups” and declared that center-right parties were not there to enable radical right-wing governments (Mendgen et Fras 2023). Yet, despite this backlash, Weber again described the Italian coalition model as “particularly interesting for the EPP” in a video address in early May (Krzysztoższek et al. 2023).

The statements of Hardt and Söder indicate a certain trend in the development of German conservative discourse in European affairs. Indeed, the representatives of the CDU in the European Parliament still struck a different tone two years ago, when the Hungarian Fidesz party declared its withdrawal from the EPP and its parliamentary group after years of discussions and wrangling between the EPP parties. While conservative members from the Nordic states as well as the POPL demanded a decisive demarcation to the right, including Fidesz's exclusion from the EPP, German conservatives made long efforts to mediate between their positions (Lang et von Ondarza 2021).

The fact that Weber's efforts to forge good ties with Meloni could have consequences for future coalition options is also shown by the reaction of leading European Social Democratic leaders: referring to Weber's rapprochement with the ECR, S&D group leader in the EP Iratxe García Pérez declared that the traditional cooperation between Social Democrats and Christian Democrats would be in danger if EPP representatives continued to move in “a very dangerous direction,” i.e., toward right-wing nationalist parties (Krzysztoższek et al. 2023).

Political equilibria in the next European Parliament (2024)



The CDU/CSU's status as the largest party (or party alliance) within the EPP group also puts it in a position to successfully block majority-building attempts with

right-wing parties. Specifically, the CDU/CSU, together with other EPP parties most likely to adhere to a cordon sanitaire policy (including the PO/KOPL and Luxembourg and Belgian members), are expected to hold about 50 to 55 mandates. Since all EPP, ECR, ID and non-attached MEPs together should have a majority of only a few seats, this represents a robust blocking minority. To form a majority against the CDU/CSU and their allies, another 45 to 50 MEPs, presumably from the right wing of the Renew Group, would have to join the coalitions. However, this appears rather implausible given the balance of forces within the Renew group (see next section).

Regardless of the exact composition and individual balance of power within the EPP group, the attitude of the CDU/CSU as a (German) party will have a decisive influence on future coalition options, since no other centrist party is likely to control a blocking minority similar to that of the German conservatives. In view of the deep and dangerous consequences that cooperation between right-wing nationalist and Christian Democratic forces in the European Parliament would entail, the CDU/CSU faces a historic responsibility.

4.2. Liberals: a moment of truth and the threat of decline

In both the "Kristersson scenario" and the "Meloni scenario," the votes of at least part of the Renew group must join those of the right to achieve a majority.

Most of the major parties in the Renew group stand on a resolutely pro-European position. As a result, they frequently find themselves in conflict with nationalist or Eurosceptic political forces at the national level. This is the case of RenaissanceFR (17 elected members in the new parliament according to the EuropeElects projection of May 31, 2023), whose main domestic contender is RN^{FR}; the Polish alliance Trzecia Droga (TD^{PL}, 7 elected members), which is opposed to PiS^{PL} in domestic politics; the FDP^{DE} (7 elected members), whose leadership rejects any formal cooperation with the AfD^{DE}; the USR^{RO} (4 elected members), which fights against the PSD^{RO}'s clientelism; Azione-Italia Viva^{IT} (4 elected members), which did not enter the right-wing alliance led by the FdI^{IT}; the MM^{HU} (2 elected members), which opposes the Fidesz^{HU}, and so on. However, a number of Renew member parties, generally located on its right wing or presenting a more eurosceptic profile, have been able to experiment with alliances with nationalist parties. This was the case of the Dutch VVD^{NL} (5 elected members), tolerated by the PVV^{NL} in parliament at the time of the Rutte I cabinet, or Andrej Babiš's populist ANO^{CZ} party, which occasionally cooperated with the SPD^{CZ} (ID) and appeared with Viktor Orbán during the 2021 campaign (Muller 2021). All in all, on the basis of their national experience (coalition history, ideological positioning, national cleavages), one can estimate

that around 35 of RE's 90 members in the coming parliamentary term should be willing, without major reservations, to enter into agreements with nationalist parties.

While such a volume of votes alone is insufficient to reach a majority when only PPE and ECR members are involved, it suffices to provide for a majority in the "Meloni scenario". Unlike the EPP's, the Renew leadership's room for maneuver is limited, as the initiative for such a scenario falls to the People's Party. Already weakened in the polls, the Liberals risk division and a major loss of influence for their centrist line if the scenario of increased cooperation between the EPP and ECR group were to materialize. Xavier Bettel (DPLU, RE) made no mistake when he declared in *Le Monde* on June 11: "*The situation in the European Parliament is indeed likely to be difficult. I hope at least that the [conservative] European People's Party will not enter into a marriage of convenience with the far right, and that the eurosceptic conservatives [ECR] will reject it in favor of the identitarian group*" (Stroobants 2023).

5. CONCLUSION: WHICH RIGHT-OF-CENTER PARTIES WILL GOVERN IN EUROPE?

The European right, and in particular its nationalist sectors, should emerge stronger from the next European political sequence. The main beneficiaries of this shift are likely to be traditional center-right parties, which, despite a downward trend, will find themselves more than ever at the center of the continental political balance.

Within the radical right, the division between the national-conservative ECR group, considered more Atlanticist and closer to the center-right on economic issues, and the nationalists of the ID groups is unlikely to vanish. The growing CRE could try to capitalize on this division to distance itself from the historical European far-right, and forge alliances with the center-right.

The "cordon sanitaire" that saw center parties refuse to enter coalitions with the radical right is in decline in Europe. This is accompanied by a general weakening of centrist and liberal parties. As a result, right-wing alliances along the lines of the Swedish and Italian models are likely to become an arithmetically and strategically feasible option in the next term of the European Parliament. The particular practice of coalitions within the Parliament, which is characterized by changing majorities, leaves open a continuum of scenarios ranging from the pursuit of a strategy of centrist Grand coalition agreements ("Merkel scenario") to a full-fledged right-wing alliance holding an absolute majority ("Meloni scenario"). Which scenario will prevail depends largely on the choices made by the European People's Party (EPP).

Within the EPP, the German Conservatives and their center-right allies will occupy a key position in the next parliament. Currently opposing any collaboration with nationalist parties at both national and European level, the CDU/CSU should have a sufficient blocking minority to prevent a right-wing or far-right majority. While EPP leader Manfred Weber (CSUDE) makes no secret of his interest in the "Meloni scenario" of a right-wing alliance, his stance is causing a stir within the CDU/CSU's leadership.

More than in the hands of the MEPs themselves, the key to this strategic dilemma could in fact lie in Berlin and Munich, where the two major conservative parties are developing their official positions.

On the eve of a crucial European election, their historic responsibility cannot be understated.

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