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Can the right in East and West unite?

Eurosceptic right-wing parties made significant gains in the European elections. But their common interest can only go so far

The European Parliament elections saw the Eurosceptic right gain a greater share of votes than ever before. In some of Europe's biggest countries, they even wonthe plurality: France's Rassemblement National (RN) stands at 23.3 per cent, Italy's Lega Nord at 33.6 per cent, Poland's Law and Justice (PiS) party at 43.1 per cent and Hungary's Fidesz even at 52.3 per cent. But despite these successes, it's unclear whether the radical right in Europe's East and West will be able to really unite.

The establishment of a unified Eurosceptic radical-right bloc in the European Parliament got a significant boost at the beginning of May, just before the EP elections. A month before in Milan, Matteo Salvini's announcement about the launch of the European Alliance of Peoples and Nations (EAPN) failed to get resonance among the Eurosceptic populist parties in the eastern Member States of the EU. However, with the declaration of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán about the withdrawal of his support from Manfred Weber's candidacy to the Commission Presidency, the ice may be broken.

Orbán's unexpected move did not only bring a sudden end to the wrangling about the his Fidesz party's membership in the European People's Party (EPP), but together with the cordial visits of Matteo Salvini and Heinz-Christian Strache in Budapest it also demonstrated Orbán's strategic turn from the EPP to the Eurosceptic camp. Considering the regional networks and power position of Fidesz, it will hardly depart alone; several smaller EPP members, like the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (RMDSZ) the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) may follow suit.

Eurosceptic parties in the European Parliament

Eurosceptic populist and radical-right parties have been organised in

three distinct political groups in the 2014-2019 legislative period of the European Parliament. Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) may serve as the fundament of Salvini's future EAPN, as it gathers within its ranks the main Western European hard-Eurosceptic radical-right parties, the Italian Lega Nord, Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National (RN), the Belgian Vlaams Belang, and the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ). ENF is the only Eurosceptic political group in the EP that will be not hard hit by Brexit.

ECR will be significantly weakened by the departure of the Tories, while the dissolution of EFDD (Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy), practically a technical alliance between the Brexit Party (former UKIP) and Italy's Five Star Movement (M5S) appears to be matter of fact. Furthermore, other key Eurosceptic parties already started gravitating to EAPN. Germany's AfD (former EFDD), the Spanish Vox, the Danish People's Party and the Sweden Democrats (former ECR) already announced their interest in joining EAPN's ranks in the next European Parliament.

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However, Eurosceptic populist parties from the Eastern EU member states remained rather reluctant and did not rush joining EAPN, although without their seats Salvini's dream about a breakthrough of 'patriotic forces' in the EP remains clearly out of reach. The reasons for that are manifold. Obviously, Salvini primarily courted Viktor Orbán and Jaroslaw Kaczynski, heads of the largest and most influential Eurosceptic populist parties in the region, while others were largely left behind.

Common interests and clear divergences

Since the outbreak of the refugee crisis in 2015, the ideological positions of the radical-right in Western and East-Central-Europe showed significant convergence. Anti-immigration discourse, xenophobia and islamophobia became the key building blocks of radical right rhetoric even in the societies of the Eastern EU countries not experiencing significant immigration and lacking considerable Muslim minorities. But in spite of the growing ideological proximity, the divergence of objective national interests remains.

The issues of resettlement of asylum seekers and the connections to

Russia play a role in this regard, but their importance should not be overestimated. Resettlement is overall a dividing issue for the radical-right bloc. Not only the Eastern, but also the Northern parties reject it, while Italy's Lega belongs to its strongest advocates. Cultivating friendly or hostile relationship with Russia is not subjected to an east-West cleavage at all. Populist parties in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary predominantly maintain close ties to the Kremlin, but that did not hinder the strategic Budapest-Warsaw axis of Orbán and Kaczynski.

The main dividing issue is the redistribution of EU financial resources and the maintaining of cohesion transfers. While radical-right parties in net payer countries like Germany, The Netherlands, Denmark or Sweden advocate the abolishment of cohesion transfers, it's the utmost interest of the net beneficiary countries in the East to maximise them. In contrast to their Western European counterparts, the Euroscepticism of most East-Central-European radical right parties has its intrinsic limits: the EU must remain a functioning 'transfer Union'.

The Peacock's end...?

Hungarian political strategy toward European partners and institutions has been often characterised in the past years as 'peacock dance'. But this flexible and deceptive strategy that allowed Viktor Orbán to dismantle liberal democracy in Hungary and avoid any significant consequence at European level, appeared to come to an ultimate and irrevocable end on 6 May 2019.

The mounting tensions between the Hungarian governing party Fidesz and the right-conservative EPP group became insurmountable when a large chunk of EPP MEPs voted in favour of the Sargentini Report, launching the Article 7 procedure against Hungary in September 2018. This culminated in the suspension of Fidesz's EPP membership in March 2019 and in the recent withdrawal of Orbán's support from Weber's candidacy. As a last accord of peacock dance, Orbán consciously established his contacts to Salvini and the European radical-right to maintain leverage over the EPP and demonstrate his party's multivectoral opportunities.

Now the ball is in the court of Jaroslaw Kaczyncki's PiS party, the main political powerhouse of the European

It appeared before the EP elections that Orbán already made the strategic choice in favour of the radical right. The sheer fact that the Hungarian Prime Minister announced his decision on a common press conference with Heinz-Christian Strache just one week after the personal visit of Matteo Salvini to Hungary,

Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) beside the Brexit-plagued Tories.

suggests that Orbán might have reached a 'point of no return' in his relations to EPP. Nevertheless, Fidesz did not leave EPP yet, nor were excluded, even if it only appears to be a matter of time. However, the institutional cooperation with the forces of the future EAPN was not announced either, which might remind us that Orbán has still not run out of options.

Warsaw's strategic dilemma

Now the ball is in the court of Jaroslaw Kaczyncki's PiS party, the main political powerhouse of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) beside the Brexit-plagued Tories. In spite of PiS's stunning electoral success, ECR can be significantly weakened, or even fade away in the aftermath of the EP elections due to desertion of smaller member parties to EAPN and the departure of the Tories after Brexit.

With the appointment of Mateusz Morawiecki as Polish Prime Minister in December 2017, PiS made an attempt to emulate Hungary's previously so successful, flexible peacock dance strategy. Now, the situation of the Polish Law and Justice party is even more delicate on the stage of Eurosceptic party politics than any of its East-Central-European kins.

Poland is also under the scrutiny of Article 7 procedure due to the systemic violation of rule of law and the undermining of democracy in the country, while it harbours large political ambitions at the European level. The Polish society is fairly pro-European, and the government is highly interested in securing an adequate amount of cohesion transfers in the next MFF that requires a constructive approach at the European stage. Furthermore, PiS has been one of ECR's two powerhouses. That's why swapping its leading position in a non-insignificant European political group to a strong, but rather 'one among equals' position aside of Lega, RN and AfD in EAPN may not appear as such a promising trade-off. Last but not least, PiS could remain in permanent minority position within EAPN in issues like Transatlantic relations, trade, internal market including the freedom of movement, or Russia.

Although several of its members already departed, PiS still might be able to preserve and maintain ECR as a moderate Eurosceptic group that can engage in practical cooperation with the political mainstream in issues like the single market, trade, economic governance, and foreign policy, while it can join the position of the radical-right in identity issues like asylum and migration. At the beginning, the geographical focus of the

group indeed might shift to the East. But in the longer term ECR can provide a viable institutional alternative for all parties that pursue moderate Eurosceptic positions, but would like to distinguish themselves from the radical-right. It could also significantly extend its political leeway, and secure more favourable positions for Poland in the negotiations of the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF).

The main challenge for the mainstream pro-European political groups in this scenario is clear. Can EPP, S&D and ALDE engage in practical cooperation with a PiS-dominated ECR to divide the Eurosceptic spectrum and prevent the amalgamation of nearly all Eurosceptic, populist and radical-right parties – even if PiS systematically violates European values, undermines rule of law, and strikes down democracy at domestic level in Poland? And what if Viktor Orbán realises that ECR can offer Fidesz an influential position to determine the orientation of a European political group – something that he can never enjoy at the side of Salvini and Le Pen – and which allows him to act as a true power broker, situated between the mainstream parties and the radical right?



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