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The illusion of normalcy

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Europe is shifting to the right. Across the continent, right-wing populist, radical right-wing or even extreme right-wing parties are gaining significant support in elections in nearly all European states. In several countries, they are already part of the government, and in some, such as Italy, Hungary and Slovakia, they head the government.

All around, there is a palpable sense of helplessness as to how this shift to the right can be stopped. Even the hope that conservative-led governments could halt this trend towards the extreme right seems to be fading — a lesson recently learned in Germany, where the AfD continues to soar despite the CDU taking over the reins of government.

This shift to the right is not only changing national politics, but also has a significant influence on the agenda of the EU and the European integration and unification project. But unlike what is happening at the national level, the shift to the right in the EU is much less visible, creeping in, as it were, and almost unnoticed by the public. This is partly because the general public rarely concerns itself with the complex structures of the EU, and partly because, at first glance, everything in Brussels seems to be proceeding as usual. Isn't the new Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, the same person who has been at the helm of the EU since 2019 and is its most prominent face? Very few European citizens will be able to name one or even several commissioners, let alone their portfolios, national origins or political affiliations.

Thus, the veil of ignorance easily results in an optical illusion when it comes to Europe and the shifts in the power structure and political agenda in Brussels.

A numbers game

In June 2024, elections to the European Parliament took place. Instead of 343 seats as before, the centre-left parties (including the liberals) now only have 312 MEPs.

Whereas in the previous legislative period there were two groups to the right of the EPP, the ECR (European Conservatives and Reformists) and ID (Identity and Democracy), with a combined total of 118 MEPs, there are now three groups to the right of the EPP, with the Patriots for Europe and Europe of Sovereign Nations, which together hold 187 seats. Looking solely at the distribution of seats, 31 seats – just over four per cent of the total 720 seats – have moved from the left of the EPP to the right of the EPP in Parliament. Mathematically, this is too small a number to speak of a landslide.

But politics is not mathematics; rather, it is what one makes of the numbers. These relatively minor shifts in the distribution of seats in Parliament have opened up opportunities for the EPP that were previously inaccessible.

Whereas in the past decisions in the European Parliament were always made by an informal grand coalition of the EPP and S&D (and since 2019 often also involving Renew and/or the Greens), since June 2024 there has been the possibility of alternative majorities to the right of the centre. And there is the political will on the part of the EPP not only to consider these in theory, but also in practice.

The patriots were given responsibility for the negotiations on the 2040 climate target after the EPP withdrew its interest in the dossier, making this the first instance a far-right faction has provided a chief negotiator in the Parliament.

The firewall against the extreme right that is so often invoked in Germany has long since disappeared in Brussels. Manfred Weber, leader of the EPP party and parliamentary group, deliberately tore it down. For reasons of political expediency, he refuses to make a clear commitment to finding a majority in the democratic centre and has no qualms about forming alliances with far-right factions in votes.

Weber's actions are particularly controversial because, unlike in previous legislatures, the far-right forces are now keen to play an active role in shaping EU legislation.

While they used to be known primarily for misappropriating EU funds (Marine Le Pen's conviction is the most prominent example here) and for their absence from Parliament and committee work, they have now changed their strategy — and are making their presence felt, trying to exert influence, particularly on their core right-wing populist issues: anti-climate protection, anti-migration and anti-equality.

And the EPP is actively supporting them in this. Recently, the patriots were given responsibility for the negotiations on the 2040 climate target after the EPP withdrew its interest in the dossier, contrary to its previous announcement. This means that, for the first time, a far-right faction is providing the chief negotiator in the European Parliament.

Institutional take-over

This shift to the far right by the EPP is not only changing the EU's political agenda, but is also increasingly destroying Brussels' political culture, which has been characterised by consensus and dialogue until now. The other democratic groups have lost a great deal of trust in the EPP and in Weber in particular. This erosion is also evident in the crumbling support for Commission President von der Leyen. While she was elected president in July 2024 with 401 (of 719 votes), only 370 voted in favour of confirming her Commission in November, and just 360 MEPs recently stood by her side in the vote of no confidence against her.

Weber's deliberately ambiguous course is visibly weakening the Commission President and strengthening his own power. The Europe-wide shift to the right has arrived in the political heart of the EU, the Parliament, mostly unnoticed by the wider European public.

In the other institutions of the Union, the Council and the Commission, however, it is much more visible. Whereas in the previous legislative term there were ten commissioners from the EPP and ten from the S&D, there are currently only four commissioners from the S&D (from Spain, Denmark, Romania and Malta) compared to 15 from the EPP. For the first time, the far-right factions have two commissioners and, in Raffaele Fitto, Giorgia Meloni's loyal ally in Brussels, even an executive vice-president, who is also responsible for the extensive portfolio of cohesion and reforms.

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The picture is similar in the European Council, which is composed of the respective heads of government. Currently, only Spain, Denmark, Lithuania and Malta are led by social

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democratic governments, while EPP parties are in power in eleven of the 27 EU states. In Italy, Hungary and Slovakia, decidedly right-wing parties form the government; in several other countries, they are involved as junior partners. These countries are not only opposed to deeper European integration and strengthening the EU, but are also calling for renationalisation and actually a weakening of the Union in many policy areas.

This triple shift to the right in the European Council, the Commission and the Parliament is not without consequences for the political orientation and agenda of the EU. While the first von der Leyen Commission (2019–2024) was characterised in many fields by sometimes groundbreaking legislation and a progressive orientation — be it in the socio-ecological transformation, the legal regulation of digital services and digital markets, the introduction of a minimum wage directive or supply chain regulation, and the overall successful response to the Covid pandemic, the agenda of the current von der Leyen Commission has shifted significantly in light of the changed balance of power in the Council and Parliament.

A progressive response

The once ambitious core project of the European Green Deal has been reduced to a Clean Industrial Deal. The central themes are now security – as a cross-cutting issue, whether in defence, migration, external borders or democracy – and, in particular, competitiveness. Reducing bureaucracy and deregulation are the buzzwords of the moment in Brussels. Countless so-called omnibus regulations are intended to level out already established standards and reporting requirements. There is a danger that, under the guise of competitiveness, social standards will be dismantled and workers' rights restricted.

The Commission's recently presented draft of the new Multiannual Financial Framework (2028–2034) limits the role of the European Parliament, strengthens the nation states and weakens their federal structures. Contrary to its claims, the EU is not only extremely weak in the geopolitical context (see Ukraine and Gaza), but also in its actual core competence, the field of economic policy – as von der Leyen's capitulation to Trump's tariff diktat clearly shows.

What does this mean for the progressive forces in the EU, which currently have no effective counterweight?

The changed majorities in the Council and Commission and the weakened centre-left factions in Parliament have shifted the agenda to the right. There will be no changes in the political composition of the Commission during this legislative period. National elections in the coming years may bring about shifts in the European Council, but these could further alter the balance of power to the detriment of progressive forces — for instance, if new elections were to be held in Spain.

The task now is to make better strategic use of the reduced scope for action.

Closer cooperation between Berlin and Brussels would help to represent progressive priorities more coherently on both sides and to organise majorities on controversial issues. This would also require coordination across Europe.

In several European countries, progressive parties are involved in government as junior partners. In Germany, for example, the question arises as to how the SPD will use its role as a coalition partner in the federal government and at the same time as part of the S&D. Closer cooperation between Berlin and Brussels would help to represent progressive priorities more coherently on both sides and to organise majorities on controversial issues. This would also require coordination across Europe.

Finally, it is important to put a stop to the power games being played by Weber and the EPP in Parliament and to oblige them to cooperate with progressive forces. The negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework offer progressive forces the opportunity to set clear priorities: social security and skills development, an investment-oriented and forward-looking climate and industrial policy, as well as conditionality based on the rule of law and democratic participation.

Setting clear and visible priorities would also increase negotiating power vis-à-vis the EPP and open up opportunities for progressive change. This requires unity within the S&D Group and close cooperation between progressive forces at national and European level. If this can be achieved, the shift to the right can be countered, despite the change in the balance of power.



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