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United in division

Far-right factions are splitting and regrouping following the European elections, leading to significant upheaval across the continent

In the aftermath of the European elections, Brussels is buzzing with speculation. In the run-up to the vote, much of the discussion centred on a potential far-right coalition between the radical-right conservatives of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), led by Italy's Giorgia Meloni, and the extreme-right Identity and Democracy (ID) group, spearheaded by Marine Le Pen's French *Rassemblement National* (RN). However, the aftermath of the elections has revealed a surprising twist: the far-right factions could fragment into an unknown number of distinct groups.

These developments include the efforts of the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) to form a new political group called 'The Sovereignists'. This became necessary after they were expelled from the ID group in May 2024, just before the European elections. A rift had opened up between the ID powerhouse RN and the AfD in recent months after the infamous Potsdam meeting, where AfD participants, joined by openly neo-Nazi attendants, discussed highly problematic re-immigration strategies, reinforcing the long-standing radicalisation of the AfD. The last straw came when the AfD's top candidate, Maximilian Krah, already embroiled in a foreign influence scandal involving China, failed to condemn the former Nazi special unit SS in May 2024.

For Le Pen, the removal of the AfD from the ID group might have been a welcome opportunity to signal to the French public: we are no longer part of these extremist voices, we have changed. This may be true in their tone, but not in the ever-xenophobist and exclusionary political proposals that the party advocates. Writing this article the day after the French election, in which the RN became the largest party, this strategy unfortunately seems to be working for her, though.

Why does this matter?

The unfolding story of The Sovereignists is one of re-alignment, a process that is in full swing weeks after the European elections. Most national parties and candidates ran with a fairly clear commitment to join a particular political group in the European Parliament (think Social Democrats, Conservatives, Greens). However, there is also a sizable minority of so-called non-aligned Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), without a clear commitment to a political group. Just a few days before the informal deadline for joining a group, more than 11 per cent of elected MEPs have not yet officially committed themselves to such a group.

The status of a political group brings with it many privileges, such as the allocation of key posts, more resources than non-attached members receive and the right to receive funding for political foundations.

To obtain the status of a political group, a minimum of 23 members elected in at least one quarter of the EU Member States (currently seven) must form a group. Time is of the essence: New factions must be formed before 4 July to have a chance of benefiting from the distribution of the prestigious parliamentary posts.

What do we know about The Sovereignists?

The idea of forming a separate group emerged even before the AfD was expelled from the ID group. The more Le Pen distanced herself from the AfD, the more the idea of becoming independent, joined by other small parties and asserting German leadership in this new group matured. Shortly after the elections, the party thus began to cobble together the necessary group size and country quota. Since the exploratory talks began, the commitment of further members has fluctuated between speculation and concrete discussions. The Bulgarian *Vazrazhdane*, the Spanish newcomer *Se Acabó la Fiesta*, the Hungarian *Mi Hazánk Mozgalom*, the Slovak Republic Movement, S.O.S. Romania and NIKH from Greece, as well as a French MEP from *Reconquête*, could all join the AfD group. The Polish *Konfederacja* is also said to be a target, but remains undecided.

What is unlikely is that the Hungarian ruling Fidesz party and its 10 MEPs will join the new Sovereignists group, if it is formed at all. On 30 June, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán himself launched a new group during a meeting with former Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš and the leader of the far-right Freedom Party of Austria, Herbert Kickl.

However, 'The Patriots for Europe' still need MEPs from at least four other countries.

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The AfD had already rented a conference room in Brussels for 27 June to announce the launch of its new group. However, this meeting never took place, suggesting that the number of those who would form this xenophobic alliance has not progressed as quickly as the AfD would have liked. We can only guess at the reasons: some of the speculated candidates for membership were only approached a few days ago (*Se Acabó de Fiesta*), while others are keeping their options open for joining the ID (*Konfederacija*). But there is also internal hesitation. While the AfD is becoming increasingly extreme, some of the other potential members are *even more* extreme, and the risk of open Holocaust denial and the like may be too great — even for the AfD.

Another thing that remains nebulous, at least officially, is the political programme of the new group. But we should not expect any surprises. The message is probably already in the name. Sovereignists, after all, might want sovereignty. In recent years, the far-right advocates of the term, who were mainly concerned with migration, have proclaimed that nations must be free to decide who may enter, who may stay and who must leave. From there, the metaphor has evolved to be used on all the far-right's disgraceful pet projects to justify a range of anti-pluralist policies that they can use against virtually anyone.

This is perhaps best illustrated by the so-called Sovereigntist Sofia Declaration of the Bulgarian far-right party *Vazrazhdane*, published in April 2024. It states that European civilisation is 'threatened by the aggression of globalist ideologies' and that the right of nations to self-determination is being 'replaced by the dictatorship of a bureaucracy'. According to the declaration, the EU bureaucracy must be stopped and freed from international corporations and peace negotiations are needed in the 'European war waged with Russia'. It's a very familiar song that the AfD has also been singing for years.

What does it mean for (Social) Democrats?

The widespread assumption before the European elections that, despite

the potential increase in votes for the far right, it would be possible to rely on its internal divisions has been confirmed (for now). It seems that the division along certain factors (Russia, Ukraine) and the degree of extremism (mainly in tone, not in substance) concerning issues such as immigration or the glorification of the fascist past prevail. This division is mixed with internal power struggles driven by national interests. And division means less power.

The difficulties of The Sovereignists are a case in point. If they fail to form and achieve group status, it would be a severe blow to the AfD and those it wants to bring under its tent in terms of political influence, money and analytical support. This is not to say that all is well for the centrist forces. Even if divided, the far-right groups will vote together on some legislative proposals (anti-Green Deal). Still, they will not do so on others (Ukraine).

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For the Social Democrats, it is vital to monitor the situation closely and understand the divisions between the potentially many far-right groups. Why? Because the risk that the centre-right EPP will cooperate with some far-right parties on some legislative proposals but not on others needs to be monitored to ensure that Socialists and allies can defend progress. Finally, the split is not only between the various far-right groups, but can also be a problem *within* the groups themselves. During the last mandate, voting cohesion was lowest in the ECR and ID, a weakness that progressive forces need to exploit to build majorities and fend off those who seek to undermine them.

Keen observers have identified the threat from the far right as a unifying force for the European elections, actually driving people to the polls. After the elections, the counterintuitive message is to focus less on them and more on us. Yes, there is no way around calling a spade a spade, so let's call it what it is: far right, extreme right, xenophobe and racist. However, it is even more important to offer progressive alternatives and a vision at a time when so many people in Europe feel insecure and a sense of decline. A context that is susceptible to the same old nostalgic far-right tune 'let's return to a glorified past', which masks anti-pluralist and authoritarian aspirations. Instead, let's build a democratic and progressive present and future together.



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