

Becker, Max; von Ondarza, Nicolai

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Geostrategy from the far right: How Eurosceptic and far-right parties are positioning themselves in foreign and security policy

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SWP Comment

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Geostrategy from the Far Right

How Eurosceptic and Far-right Parties Are Positioning Themselves in Foreign and Security Policy

Max Becker and Nicolai von Ondarza

Far-right parties are gaining support across Europe. Their level of participation in national governments is increasing, and they are expected to make further gains in the European Parliament elections in June 2024. As their influence over European Union (EU) policy rises, it is imperative to assess how they are positioning themselves on crucial dimensions of EU foreign and security policy. A closer look shows that geostrategic issues remain a cleavage point that is contributing to the fragmentation of the far-right spectrum. Their positions fluctuate between a transatlantic orientation and clear support for Ukraine among the national-conservative European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), to fundamental opposition with an anti-Western stance among parts of the right-wing populist to extremist parties in the Identity and Democracy (ID) Group. Due to the intergovernmental nature of EU foreign and security policy, the biggest challenges will come with national elections and coalition-making.

The European elections in June will take place under the shadow of two central political trends. On one hand, the EU is being challenged more in foreign and security policy than ever before in its history: Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine, in which the balance of power is threatening to tip to Ukraine's disadvantage partially due to declining US aid; the war in Gaza with the potential for regional escalation in the Middle East; military conflicts in the EU's neighbourhood, such as over Nagorno-Karabakh; instability in the Western Balkans; and above all there is an increasing Sino-American rivalry and Donald Trump's potential return to the White House.

On the other hand, the growth of European far-right parties has regained momentum. In this analysis, all parties that position themselves to the right of the Christian-democratic/conservative European People's Party (EPP) are included. In the 2019 European elections, parties from this spectrum won almost 25 per cent of the seats in the European Parliament. As a result, it was increasingly difficult to form majorities in the current legislative period because at least three political groups are required. Current polls indicate that far-right parties might gain even 30 per cent of seats in the 2024 European elections (as of February 2024).



At the national level, the picture is more heterogeneous. Italy, the third-largest EU member state, has been governed by a far-right/centre-right coalition of Fratelli d'Italia (ECR), Lega (ID) and Forza Italia (EPP) since 2022, while the national-conservative Law and Justice party (PiS) lost the recent national elections in Poland. Following the election victory of Geert Wilders and his Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV) in the Netherlands, however, there is now a chance that a member of the right-wing populist and extremist party Identity and Democracy will lead an EU government for the first time. In Finland, the "Finns" (ECR) are involved in the government as a small coalition partner, while the Sweden Democrats (ECR) tolerate the Swedish minority government. In addition, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and the governing Fidesz party have moved significantly to the far right, at least since leaving the EPP. All of these governments have a vote in the European Council as well as the Foreign Affairs Council. Each will nominate a candidate for the European Commission after the European elections.

As the EU faces unprecedented challenges in foreign and security policy, the trend of political fragmentation continues, moving away from the traditional dominance of centre-right and centre-left parties. This makes it all the more important to take a look at how far-right parties are positioning themselves on foreign and security policy issues.

The far-right spectrum remains divided across Europe

Looking at the spectrum of parties to the right of the EPP in the EU and its member states in the expiring legislative period, it has not significantly changed. Attempts to forge a united far-right group have consistently failed, also due to deep splits on relations to Russia. Today, the parties are still divided into three camps.

First there are the European Conservatives and Reformists, which currently form

the fifth-largest group in the European Parliament with 68 MEPs. The ECR Group is mainly made up of national conservative parties such as Poland's PiS, Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia and Spain's VOX. In the EU institutions, members of the ECR parties are to some extent involved in forming compromises, including in the election of Ursula von der Leyen as Commission President in 2019. However, they are not part of the European "grand coalition" of EPP, Social Democrats (S&D) and Liberals — plus sometimes the Greens — that usually forms majorities in the European Parliament. With regard to the EU, the ECR parties reject further integration, advocate for more of a focus on the single market and generally demand a return to more competencies for the nation-states, but no exit options for their respective countries.

With 59 MEPs, the second group is Identity and Democracy, the sixth largest in the European Parliament. It comprises right-wing populist to extremist parties. It is dominated by three major national parties: Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National (RN) in France, the Italian Lega and the German Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). Other important ID parties are the Dutch PVV and the Austrian Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ). To date, ID member parties have largely played an opposition role in the EU institutions. No national government has been led by them so far, so they are not directly represented in the European Council. Neither are they involved in forming compromises in the European Parliament and only rarely in building majorities. A formal European *cordon sanitaire* has never existed, but due to its much more extreme stance, the ID is rarely if ever included by the other party groups when negotiating compromises. Its member parties are divided on many issues, including their stances on the EU. While Lega, the RN and to some extent the PVV have weakened their fundamental opposition to the EU in an effort to demonstrate their ability to govern, the AfD and parts of the FPÖ are arguing for the option of their countries to leave the EU.

The non-attached parties (“Non-Inscrits/NI”) in the European Parliament also include a number of far-right parties; however, this does not apply to all non-attached MEPs. The largest of the non-attached parties on this spectrum is Hungary’s Fidesz, which left the EPP Group during the current parliamentary term. Despite meetings at the highest level and invitations openly offered by (parts of) the ECR and ID groups in spring 2024, it has not yet joined either of them. The political spectrum to the right of the EPP therefore remains divided. However, changes before and after the European elections cannot be ruled out.

Geostrategic positioning

Relations with Russia have long been a central point of contention between the various European far-right parties. However, the differences extend deeper and also apply to other subjects and can be found both between the ECR, ID and NI parties as well as within those three groups.

For a better understanding of the geostrategic positioning of the far-right parties, we have therefore analysed the voting behaviour of their MEPs in the European Parliament in the current legislative period. Foreign and security policy resolutions are often not binding in the Parliament, yet this is the very reason why the parties have the opportunity to position themselves through roll-call votes of the MEPs. To this end, a total of 74 votes between July 2019 and December 2023 were analysed for this publication. In none of these were the ECR or ID parties crucial in securing a majority, meaning that the votes would not have failed without them. We examined votes in five dimensions: relations with Russia, China, the United States and NATO, respectively; issues relating to EU foreign, security and defence cooperation; and finally enlargement of the EU, including Ukraine, Moldova, and potentially Georgia and the Western Balkan states. The chart on page 4 shows the percentage of votes from the ECR,

the ID and Fidesz in the European Parliament in favour of these key dimensions.

The national-conservative ECR

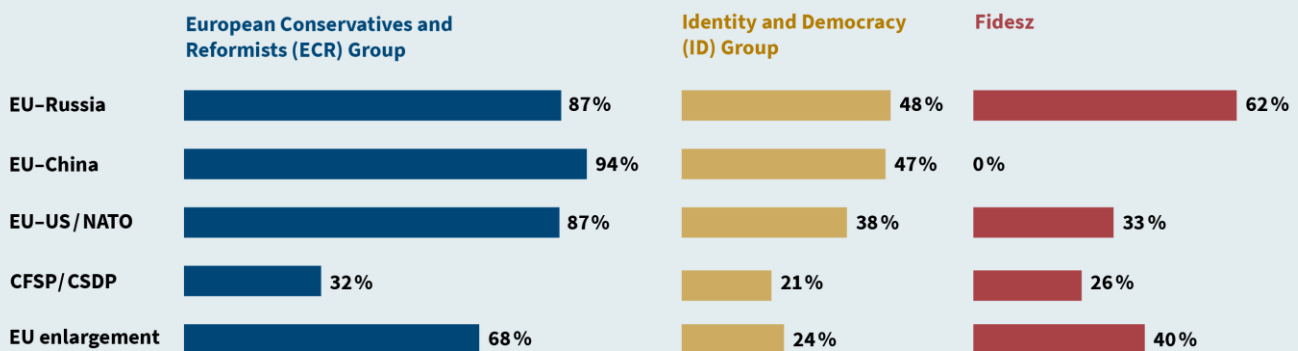
Over the period of the analysis, the national-conservative ECR Group played a predominantly constructive and compatible role. In four out of five foreign and security policy dimensions considered, it voted with the parliamentary majority in almost all cases and supported the majority of resolutions and decisions put forward.

In terms of relations with Russia, it quickly becomes clear that the ECR parties are largely united in their condemnation of the rule of law and the humanitarian situation in the Russian Federation as well as the war of aggression against Ukraine and its consequences. This is in line with the position of the majority in the European Parliament. The firm criticism of Russia by the ECR Group as a whole was recently illustrated by the co-signing of a joint declaration on further military support for Ukraine in January 2024, together with the EPP, S&D, Renew and the Greens. The ECR Group predominantly abstained only on resolutions dealing with the protection of children and young people fleeing the Ukraine war or the impact of the war on women. If we differentiate by national party, we see that the two largest parties in particular – Poland’s PiS and the Fratelli d’Italia – are clearly critical of Russia. MEPs from the Belgian Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA) also tended to vote in favour in Russia-related votes. The Swedish Democrats, the Spanish VOX and the Dutch JA21 are more ambivalent, as they abstain more frequently in votes on Russia, contrary to the group line.

Relations with the People’s Republic of China came to the fore in the European Parliament primarily through discussions on the human rights situation in Hong Kong, the EU-China strategy and the condemnation of Chinese sanctions against members of the European Parliament and EU institutions. In the ECR, only one vote against and very few abstentions were

Figure

Approval by far-right parties in the European Parliament in votes on key dimensions of EU foreign and security policy



Source: Analysis of 74 roll-call votes in the European Parliament in the 2019–2024 legislative period. Fidesz was only analysed after its exit from the EPP (March 2021).

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observed over the entire period. The PiS, VOX, the Sweden Democrats and Fratelli d’Italia – the largest party blocs – have distanced themselves from Beijing, in line with their transatlantic and Russia-critical stance, and consistently voted with the parliamentary majority. This fundamentally critical attitude towards China is also reflected in various press statements by the ECR Group. These even emphasise the proximity of the ECR’s position to the majority opinion of the parties represented in the European Parliament and adopt the terminology used about China being a “systemic rival”. Meloni’s decision to withdraw from China’s “New Silk Road” initiative also follows this pattern.

The ECR’s voting behaviour with regard to transatlantic relations is similarly clear: The overwhelming majority of ECR parliamentarians voted with the majority opinion of the Parliament, with only a small number of rare abstentions and votes against. In line with their traditionally strong transatlantic ties and their frequently expressed proximity to NATO, the approval of the PiS and the Fratelli d’Italia is clear and without dissenters. Unambiguous publications by the ECR Group emphasising the importance of the transatlantic partnership further reinforce this.

Regarding any questions on the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the

Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), the rejection of further EU integration is evident. In most of the votes under consideration, the majority of the ECR Group did not vote in favour of the projects submitted. It mostly abstained in votes concerning the annual implementation reports on the CFSP/CSDP or the European External Action Service (EEAS). The Sweden Democrats, VOX and JA21, on the other hand, largely voted against the resolutions and projects. However, it is interesting in this context that the MEPs of the ECR Group vote largely unanimously in favour of specific foreign and security policy instruments, such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP) and strategy documents such as the Strategic Compass.

An overwhelming majority in the ECR Group also votes in favour of the Commission’s EU enlargement reports and enlargement strategies as well as the Association Agreements with the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. Exceptions to this are the Sweden Democrats, the Dutch JA21 and occasionally VOX, which either abstain or vote against. Only on issues relating to the accession of Turkey and Bosnia and Herzegovina can a clear and consistent tendency to abstain be observed within the ECR Group over time; this also applies to the PiS and Fratelli d’Italia parties, which

otherwise tend to vote with the mainstream.

Identity and Democracy

The ID Group stands in stark contrasts to this. In none of the dimensions analysed did the ID Group vote clearly and consistently with the parliamentary majority. Instead, the ID proves to be an – often divided – alliance of convenience, including in foreign and security policy. Unlike the ECR, it also issues practically no joint statements and has already announced it will not adopt a common manifesto for the 2024 EU elections.

At one end of the spectrum is Lega, which predominantly supports the foreign policy guidelines of the majority political groups in the European Parliament, while at the other end are the German AfD and the French RN as parties of fundamental opposition.

The issue of the EU's relations with Russia is a good reflection of this division: MEPs from Lega and the Finnish Perussuomalaiset (“the Finns”) were largely united in their support for the proposals tabled in the European Parliament on this matter. However, the latter left the ID Group in spring 2023 and joined the ECR, also because differences within the group over how to deal with Russia and its war of aggression became increasingly clear. Lega's current Russia-critical stance is above all an expression of the pragmatism of the party, which is now aligned with the majority position as the governing party in Italy, but it and its party leader, Matteo Salvini, had previously sought close ties to Russia and Vladimir Putin in the 2010s. In contrast, both the RN and AfD often abstain or vote unanimously against the parliamentary majority opinion on resolutions concerning Russia. However, there is no clear trend of a coordinated vote between the two. Quite often, the RN abstains and the AfD votes against, or vice versa. This voting behaviour is a reflection of both parties' at the very least ambiguous relationship with Putin's Russia.

A slightly different voting pattern can be observed in the ID Group when it comes to European-Chinese relations. At least with regard to the condemnation of the human rights situation in Hong Kong, there is a tendency towards approval on the part of Lega and the Belgian Vlaams Belang, whereas the tendency is towards abstention for the RN and AfD. When it comes to fundamental positioning towards China and support for the EU-China strategy, abstention becomes strict rejection by the RN and AfD. Although the RN and AfD do not adopt a clear position of support here, the President of the ID Group (Lega) adopted a very critical stance on the human rights situation in China and Hong Kong as well as the influence of the People's Republic on critical infrastructure within the EU through group statements, thus further highlighting the group's division.

Transatlantic relations are another controversial topic within the ID Group. Lega MEPs voted consistently in favour of the resolutions and strategy documents on the EU's relationship to the United States and/or NATO tabled during the period under review. MEPs from Vlaams Belang, the Czech Svoboda a přímá demokracie and the RN voted “no” in all votes concerning the EU's relations with the United States and on relations with NATO. The AfD either abstained or voted against all resolutions relating to transatlantic relations and was internally divided on some votes.

Specific foreign and security policy instruments of the CFSP and CSDP are not met with particular enthusiasm by the MEPs of the ID Group: The majority of MEPs, led by the RN and AfD, are opposed. In contrast, Lega MEPs ranged between abstention, for example in votes on PESCO or the rapid reaction force presented in the Strategic Compass, and approval, for example in votes on the ASAP. The annual implementation reports of the CFSP and CSDP are also rejected by a majority and are only supported by Lega. All votes relating to the activities of the EEAS, such as budget planning or foreign climate policy considerations, are rejected by the ID MEPs, as is the

case with the ECR. Here, even the generally supportive Lega usually votes against (similar to those of the ECR).

For the fifth dimension analysed, enlargement, the following picture emerges: In none of the votes did the ID Group vote by a majority in favour of the submitted progress reports or strategy papers on the EU's enlargement policy. Again, it can be observed that Lega MEPs alternate between abstention and approval. When there was support for enlargement-related projects within the ID Group, it came exclusively from Lega MEPs. The de facto alliance between the RN and AfD already described is particularly pronounced in this policy area, and both predominantly vote against enlargement-related reports and projects – and the FPÖ, Vlaams Belang and Svoboda follow suit.

Non-attached far-right parties

An analysis of the far-right and/or populist parties without parliamentary group membership in the European Parliament is also necessary because two of the non-attached parties – the Italian Five Star Movement and the Hungarian Fidesz – were or are currently involved in governments in member states. Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party left the EPP Group in March 2021 after a long political dispute and was therefore only considered in this analysis from that point onwards.

The Five Star Movement does not fit well into the conventional right/left spectrum. In the last EU legislative period from 2014 to 2019, it was – together with Nigel Farage's UKIP, for example – part of the right-wing populist group Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy, which was no longer able to constitute itself as a separate group after the 2019 European elections. The Five Star Movement is now classified as (left-wing) populist and Eurosceptic. With regard to foreign and security policy, it is evident that it voted with the parliamentary majority for most of the votes and across all foreign policy dimensions considered. It

thus joins the pro-majority voting behaviour of Fratelli d'Italia and Lega.

The voting behaviour of Fidesz MPs, by contrast, clearly depends on the respective foreign policy dimension and ranges between rejection, abstention and approval. The Hungarian government's ambivalent attitude towards the conflict in Ukraine is evident in the question of the EU's relations with Russia. Fidesz MEPs supported a not insignificant proportion of the votes on the EU-Russia dimension. For instance, they voted unanimously in favour of the first resolution condemning the war of aggression in March 2022 and also supported the criticism of the imprisonment of Alexey Navalny and the concentration of Russian forces on the Ukrainian border in 2021. However, it is striking that as soon as a certain threshold of condemnation of Russian government action is crossed – for example the classification of Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism or the establishment of a tribunal for the crime of aggression against Ukraine – this is no longer supported by Fidesz MEPs.

A clear and consistent rejection of EU policy towards Russia can be observed in the two small Slovakian far-right parties, Slovak Patriot and Hnutie Republika, as well as the French Reconquête; however, they only have one seat each in the European Parliament. The latter joined the ECR Group in February 2024, in which it will be at odds with the group's line on foreign and security policy. This generally rejectionist voting behaviour can be observed across all five dimensions examined.

European-Chinese relations, on the other hand, represent a special case with regard to Fidesz. During the period under review and after Fidesz left the EPP, it was found that its MEPs unanimously rejected resolutions on the human rights situation in Hong Kong and the imposition of sanctions on EU institutions by the People's Republic. This can certainly be explained by the fact that the government in Budapest has recently sought greater proximity to the People's Republic and contrasts not only with the

stance of the ECR, but also with that of the ID Group.

Transatlantic relations present a more ambiguous picture. In principle, Fidesz is in favour of cooperation with NATO, but it abstained on votes relating to the EU's relations with the United States. This also reflects the recent cooling of relations between Orbán and the current US administration due to the debate on the rule of law and the question of Sweden's accession to NATO.

An equal level of volatility in the voting behaviour of Fidesz can be observed for the CFSP and CSDP. The annual reports submitted on these issues are generally rejected unanimously. Instruments such as the ASAP and the Strategic Compass, on the other hand, are accepted by Fidesz MEPs. In contrast, instruments such as the Rapid Reaction Force and EU Battlegroups are met with neutrality, and there is no clear position on votes concerning the EEAS. This is in line with Hungary's policy under Orbán, who rejects arms deliveries to Ukraine but has generally supported initiatives to strengthen European military capabilities.

A remarkable pattern emerges for questions concerning enlargement policy. In individual votes, Fidesz MEPs voted unanimously against the annual reports or strategy documents submitted, such as the progress reports on Serbia. However, the votes against are not due to a rejection of Serbia's accession prospects, but because the Fidesz MEPs considered the progress reports as being too critical, particularly with regard to the rule of law. The new EU strategy on enlargement policy discussed in the European Parliament in November 2022 was also not approved. It is noteworthy, however, that Fidesz voted unanimously in favour of the resolution on Ukraine's candidate status in the summer of 2022, despite Orbán's later policy of obstruction.

Conclusions and outlook

The analysis of the foreign and security policy positions of far-right parties in the

European Parliament underlines the need for a thorough differentiation. The far-right spectrum remains deeply divided on foreign and security policy issues in particular: On the one hand, there are the national-conservative parties of the ECR. They have been largely united in this area and have joined the European mainstream in their positions on Russia, China, the United States and EU enlargement. Notable exceptions were women's rights issues and support for EU integration in security and defence policy. However, even here the majority of ECR parties agreed to specific initiatives (such as PESCO).

On the other hand, there are the right-wing populist to extremist parties in the ID Group, which were also much more divided when it came to foreign and security policy. However, the majority of them adopted oppositional – in some cases explicitly anti-Western – stances on issues such as the EU's relations with Russia and China. Significant exceptions to this are Lega, which is part of the government in Italy, whereas the RN, the AfD, the FPÖ and the PVV in particular reject the majority of the EU's foreign and security policy principles.

Based on these differences, the election forecasts for the next European Parliament should also be considered in a more nuanced manner. Currently (as of February 2024), these forecasts predict a significant overall shift to the right of the EPP, towards both the ID and ECR groups, one of which could become the third-largest group in the European Parliament. With its anti-Western stance, the ID will question the EU's fundamental policy positions much more than the ECR, not only in foreign and security policy, but also in other areas. As fragmentation in the European Parliament is also expected to increase, the parties to the left and right of centre will have to clarify the circumstances under which they are willing to cooperate with the ECR, potentially even as a critical pillar to form majorities in the future, especially on foreign and security policy issues.

The power balance between the ECR and ID could also depend on whether and, if so,

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SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und
Politik
German Institute for
International and
Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3 – 4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

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which of the two groups the Hungarian Fidesz under Orbán joins. Media reports suggest that Fidesz is more likely to seek membership in the ECR after the European elections, but this would weaken ECR's Russia-critical and pro-Western positioning – and is already being met with resistance within the group. At least when it comes to foreign and security policy, Fidesz is closer to the ID Group, and when it comes to China it would be an outlier both in the ECR and the ID.

However, the greatest challenge to the EU's unity and ability to act in foreign and security policy stems from developments at the national level. The voting behaviour in the European Parliament analysed here is an indicator of positioning; however, the actual decisions are in most cases not made in the Parliament but by the national governments in the Foreign Affairs Council. Here, the disruptive potential is much greater in view of national vetoes – Orbán's increasing use of vetoes on topics concerning Ukraine and Russia are a case in point. After all, there is now participation by far-right parties in a growing number of member state governments, but so far mainly from the ECR spectrum, with the exception of Lega.

Looking ahead, the election victory of Geert Wilders in the Netherlands and the current lead of the FPÖ in Austria (elections in autumn 2024) could result in an ID-led government for the first time. From this perspective, it is all the more crucial to work towards majority decisions in foreign and security policy (see SWP Comment 61/2022) and to launch initiatives to strengthen the EU's capacity to act as quickly as possible, and not just after a potential Trump election victory.

*Max Becker is the Research Assistant in the EU/Europe Division at SWP.
Dr Nicolai von Ondarza is Head of the EU/Europe Division at SWP.
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