

## What Future for the CFSP after the Radical Right Upswing?

by Federico Castiglioni and Luca Cinciripini

The latest elections showed that the radical right within the EU Parliament has increased its seats and hence political influence. The conservative group of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) gained 7 seats while the Identity and Democracy (ID) group has enlarged its membership by 9.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the radical right can count on the support of 15 MEPs from *Alternative für Deutschland* and the 11 belonging to the Hungarian Fidesz party. If united, the bloc would gather support from 160 MEPs, being the second political force in the Parliament.

However, the so-called radical right is not a cohesive force and therefore its relevance will be highly dependent on political factors. Even because of that, the majority supporting the future Commission is unlikely to change.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> European Parliament, *2024 European Election Results*, <https://results.elections.europa.eu>.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Gray, Michel Rose and Julia Payne, "EU's von der Leyen Seeks Centrist Allies after Far-Right Election Gains", in *Reuters*, 10 June 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eus-von-der-leyen-seeks-centrist-allies-after-far-right-election-gains-2024-06-10>.

In a scenario where another centrist majority faces such a right-wing surge, the most critical phase may be the presentation of the EU Agenda 2024-2029, which – aiming at a broad consensus – needs to reconcile not only different national interests but also opposing political views in a coherent framework. The new landscape may drive the future Commission to seek votes from the aforementioned right-wing groups, trading some strategic priorities to avoid the creation of a large anti-Commission bloc in the Parliament. The Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), whose importance has grown during the current legislative term due to recent crises in Ukraine and the Middle East, is one of the policy areas that could be impacted by the outlined scenario.

### *Conservatives, radical right and EU foreign policy*

In the EU Parliament, the radical right is composed of two distinct political families, namely the ECR and the ID group. Despite an approach tendentially

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Eurosceptic and mistrustful of the current EU integration processes, the ECR group has over the years taken positions more aligned with those of the European People's Party (EPP), especially in foreign policy, where there is a growing pro-Atlantic proclivity, coupled with hawkish attitudes towards Russia.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, the ID group has so far been characterised by a nationalist nature and takes openly hostile positions to the EU, uncooperative in the European Parliament and opposed to any further transfer of sovereignty from the national to the EU dimension. The group's markedly nationalistic nature makes it challenging to find a synthesis between the different national claims, which in turn renders a structural and effective collaboration within the group, with the ECR or the EPP more complex. This cooperation is even more difficult in topical areas such as foreign policy whose relevance is steadily growing.

### *Support for Ukraine*

As of today, it seems likely that the next European Parliament will continue providing financial, logistical and military support to Kyiv, regardless of the electoral results. Therefore, the elections should not translate into a reversal of the EU's support for Ukraine, even in consideration of the positions to date assumed by the ECR, which are

<sup>3</sup> ECR Group, *The ECR Will Stand by Ukraine until Russia Is Defeated and Beyond*, 9 February 2023, [https://ecrgroup.eu/article/legutko\\_the\\_ecr\\_will\\_stand\\_by\\_ukraine\\_until\\_russia\\_is\\_defeated\\_and\\_beyond](https://ecrgroup.eu/article/legutko_the_ecr_will_stand_by_ukraine_until_russia_is_defeated_and_beyond).

often aligned with the current majority.<sup>4</sup> On the Ukrainian issue, the ID group is more fragmented; there are parties like the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) that are traditionally close to Russia and others, such as the Polish and Baltic, which look particularly hawkish on Moscow. Many parties within the group are today openly campaigning to cut the EU aid for Ukraine, sometimes supporting pro-Russian narratives.

In October 2023, the European Parliament voted by a vast majority for an aid package supporting Ukraine within the multi-annual financial framework 2024-2027.<sup>5</sup> This same majority might be slightly thinner after the elections. The most sceptical and hostile parties towards the Ukrainian cause may attempt to exploit the budgetary instruments and negotiations in the aftermath of the EU elections to condition the Union's choices in this area, especially concerning reconstruction or new financial loans. Another complex issue to unravel in the next years will be Ukraine's access to the common EU market and its repercussions on the Common Agricultural Policy; the topic is expected to be highly polarising especially within the right-wing camp, as the boycott of Ukrainian grain showcased in 2022.

<sup>4</sup> EPP Group, *EPP, S&D, Renew Europe, Greens/EFA and ECR Leaders Call on EUCO to Deliver on Ukraine*, 31 January 2024, <https://www.eppgroup.eu/newsroom/leaders-call-on-euco-to-deliver-on-ukraine>.

<sup>5</sup> European Parliament, *A Long-Term Solution for Ukraine's Funding Needs*, 17 October 2023, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20231013IPR07125>.

### Enlargement

After years of stagnation, the enlargement process has been reinvigorated by the war in Ukraine. In the last years, the Commission imprinted to enlargement a new speed, conferring the candidate status upon Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova in 2023 and opening negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, while the situation in Georgia has been made muddled by the recent approval of the so-called “Foreign Agents Law” by the national Parliament. ECR and ID’s political stances about enlargement are taking quite divergent trajectories. The parties that constitute the ID group are openly opposed to the enlargement process, mainly because of the consequences in terms of expected migration flows as well as the potential impact on cohesion funds and the overall financial budget of the Union. Differently, the parties within or close to ECR pursue purely national interests in favouring the inclusion of specific candidates while opposing others. This is what happened with the Polish Law and Justice party (PiS) supporting the enlargement towards Ukraine for national security reasons, or Fidesz’s favouring the Western Balkans while opposing Ukraine.<sup>6</sup>

ECR’s positions on enlargement are therefore more blurred and have been profoundly affected by the invasion of Ukraine. The partial narrowing of the gap between ECR and the incumbent

majority on this issue is testified by the document that outlines ECR’s priorities for the next legislature, where enlargement is defined as “a geostrategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity”,<sup>7</sup> and will be supported in the next future by the parliamentary group.<sup>8</sup> Yet, as the enlargement debate is increasingly linked to the reform of the EU Treaties, the ECR group tried to disconnect this relationship, stating that “the enlargement process must not be used as a backdoor to introduce [...] treaty changes and new powers such as qualified majority voting in the Council on foreign policy issues”.<sup>9</sup> The wording indicates a positive attitude towards the enlargement process as long as it will not trigger real institutional changes.

Therefore, an increased centrality of the conservatives and the far right may hurdle any reform aimed at relinquishing the member states’ veto power in foreign policy or approving any voting mechanisms in the EU Council that may diminish the perceived national influence. Although this attitude may not necessarily halt the

<sup>7</sup> The wording adopted by the ECR’s document resounds the conclusions of the European Council of December 2023. See: *European Council Conclusions, 14 and 15 December 2023*, point 13, <https://europa.eu/!VTprkk>.

<sup>8</sup> ECR Group, *Priorities 2024-2029*, April 2024, point 11, <https://ecrgroup.eu/priorities#11>.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* However, it is worth noting that Meloni’s Italy joined the group of countries in favour of qualified majority voting on foreign policy, thereby contradicting the ECR stance. See *Joint Statement of the Foreign Ministries on the Launch of the Group of Friends on Qualified Majority Voting in EU Common Foreign and Security Policy*, 4 May 2023, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/-/2595304>.

<sup>6</sup> Rosa Balfour and Stephan Lehne (eds), *Charting the Radical Right’s Influence on EU Foreign Policy*, Brussels, Carnegie Europe, April 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/04/charting-the-radical-rights-influence-on-eu-foreign-policy>.

enlargement process, the opposition to any reforms at the institutional level could indirectly put the brakes on it in light of the nexus between enlargement, governability and reforms.<sup>10</sup>

### *Defence funding*

One of the primary fears of a potential right-wing Parliament is the stalling of the shy advancements recently made in the defence field. The latest progress in the CSDP domain has been initiated by the Juncker Commission with the establishment of the European Defence Fund, an instrument intended to improve joint military research and development. The von der Leyen Commission updated this framework with the Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA), which, according to proponents, should encourage member states to purchase European defence systems rather than relying on external procurement (mostly the US and South Korea). The significance of these steps should not be underestimated in consideration of the forthcoming rearmament carried out by EU member states, which necessitate topping off the inventories that were supplied to Ukraine. Besides the armament industry, the EU is also focusing on the establishment of a Rapid Deployment Capacity, a small operative standing unit composed of rotating European brigades. The settlement of this force was endorsed by the 2022 Strategic Compass,<sup>11</sup> the EU's major strategic

<sup>10</sup> Luigi Scazzieri, "The European Parliament Elections: A Sharp Right Turn?", in *CER Insights*, 30 April 2024, <https://www.cer.eu/node/10889>.

<sup>11</sup> Council of the EU, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, 14 March 2022, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/410976\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/410976_en).

document published (after months of fruitless elaboration) in response to the Ukrainian invasion.

When it comes to the radical right groups, the two aspects of defence (industry and operational) must be distinguished. For instance, in terms of development and joint acquisition, the ECR has been a staunch backer of a stronger European defence (and its lawmakers even contributed to the EDIRPA's regulation),<sup>12</sup> while the ID's attitude has been more ambiguous, and the group looks poorly integrated. However, in terms of operational steps, both political groups are extremely suspicious about the formation of a European army or any joint deployment force. The leaders of all of these parties have expressed concern that such an instrument would either threaten the states' sovereignty in a sensitive subject like defence (especially ID)<sup>13</sup> or weaken NATO (especially ECR).

### *Maintenance with no leap forwards*

Although the two groupings have similarities, it is important to note that the alignments in the future EU Parliament may be more fluid and unpredictable due to current political circumstances. In this regard, two

<sup>12</sup> Sebastian Clapp, "European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA)", in *EPRS Briefings*, November 2023, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS\\_BRI\(2023\)739294](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2023)739294).

<sup>13</sup> Jordan Bardella, "Défense nationale: il faut à la France les moyens de la puissance et de l'indépendance", in *L'Opinion*, 9 November 2022, <https://www.lopinion.fr/politique/defense-nationale-il-faut-a-la-france-les-moyens-de-la-puissance-et-de-lindependance-la-tribune-de-jordan-bardella>.

factors could be significant: the formation of the next EU Commission (with the associated political dynamics) and the possible election of Donald Trump in November. From a European standpoint, especially this latter point is sensitive, owing to the growing concern that Europe alone would not be able to sustain Ukraine militarily and economically for long in case of a US disengagement.

With these caveats in mind, in the three outlined sectors – Ukraine, enlargement and defence – the first challenge for the ID and ECR groups is to align their respective agendas. The specific political weight of the two formations is linked to their unity and the ability to put forward a set of coherent proposals (or vetoes). While the greater presence of MEPs from the two groups will be noticed across sectors, their ability to influence the next Parliament's policy agenda and especially CFSP will be closely linked to their ability to overcome their internal fragmentation. It is precisely this latter aspect, in light of the heterogeneous nature of the two groups, that seems to limit their effective ability to intervene effectively in the policy areas under consideration. The different stances held by the radical right on the dossiers considered – also subject to the political contingencies of the moment – will hardly undermine EU policy in support of Ukraine. Likewise, defence investments should not suffer profound deviations. The only field at risk of circumvention is enlargement, where the game and the players however transcend the simple divide left-right wing.

Against this background, the majority of the radical right in the next EU Parliament will likely endorse the CFSP initiatives at play, but hardly come up with new ideas or proposals, nor accept deep revisions of the current foreign policy framework. Arguably, the different formations on the right side of the Parliament will try to limit any possible reform of the institutional set-up of the CFSP, following the traditional skepticism over an enlargement of the EU competencies in this area. The obstructionism of the radical right on a possible CFSP reform will not necessarily translate into interference with the current initiatives, which mostly maintain an intergovernmental and voluntary approach.

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