

THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT'S *CORDON SANITAIRE:* REINTERPRETED THROUGH COMPETITION AND COORDINATION ON THE RIGHT

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SUMMARY

The 2024 European Parliament elections made it numerically possible to form a majority of parties on the right: the European People's Party (EPP), European Conservatives and Reformists, Patriots for Europe, and Europe of Sovereign Nations. Yet this has not produced a stable right-wing coalition. Instead, this analysis argues that the *cordon sanitaire* is undergoing selective erosion. The EPP claims to reject formal or institutional cooperation with the radical right. But it has unilaterally reformulated the *cordon sanitaire* away from what had previously been treated as the prevailing understanding of it.

By combining interviews, qualitative desk research, and overlap in national party-level voting, the analysis shows where the *cordon sanitaire* is being eroded, where it is not, and why. Data on the alignment between EPP parties and their national counterparts to the left and right point to the continued relevance of a centre majority. Differences with the radical right are wide in technocratic areas such as the single market and sensitive ones such as foreign policy. Even in the most politicised areas – migration, agriculture and parts of Green Deal deregulation – right-wing majorities appear to remain selective rather than routine.

The report also shows that claimed ideological incompatibility matters. Christian Democratic and radical-right conservatism clash most clearly on the European Union and liberal democracy.

Measured against the EPP's reformulated interpretation, the *cordon sanitaire* appears formally secure in the current parliamentary term. Even so, by knowingly moving away from its previously accepted interpretation, the EPP has opened the door to its selective erosion and loss of meaning. Its long-term durability and future meaning will depend on whether national political dynamics, policy conflicts, and the unresolved contest over conservatism in Europe gradually push the two conservative sides closer together or further apart.



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CONTENTS

CONTENTS 1

FIGURE & TABLES 2

1. INTRODUCTION: A *CORDON SANITAIRE* UNDER PRESSURE 3

2. METHODOLOGY 6

3. THE INTERESTS BEHIND WEAKENING THE *CORDON SANITAIRE* 10

3.1. THE EPP'S INTERESTS 11

3.2. THE ECR'S INTERESTS 13

3.3. THE INTERESTS OF THE PFE AND THE ESN 14

3.4. THE EPP'S CHANGED TERMS OF COOPERATION DO NOT EXIST IN A VACUUM 16

3.5. ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT 17

4. POLICY ALIGNMENT ON THE RIGHT REMAINS SELECTIVE, NOT STRUCTURAL 18

4.1. MIGRATION 21

4.2. GREEN DEAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY 23

4.3. AGRICULTURE AND THE CAP 25

4.4. SINGLE MARKET 26

4.5. FOREIGN POLICY 28

4.6. DEFENCE AND SECURITY 32

4.7. DEMOGRAPHY 34

4.8. SELECTIVE CHANGES, CONTINUED CENTRIST ALIGNMENT 35

5. COMPATIBLE OR IRRECONCILABLE? COMPETING CONSERVATISMS IN EUROPE 37

5.1. TWO AXES OF INCOMPATIBILITY: EUROPE AND LIBERAL DEMOCRACY 38

5.2. THE NON-BINARY REALITY OF CONSERVATIVE POLITICS 40

5.3. WAITING FOR A 'CONSTRUCTIVE RIGHT' OR EMPOWERING THE RADICALS? 41

5.4. SYNTHESIS OR ZERO-SUM COMPETITION? 43

6. CONCLUSION: THE *CORDON SANITAIRE* IN A NEW EQUILIBRIUM 44

REFERENCES 46

ANNEX I. LIST OF INTERVIEWED PERSONS 47

Figure & Tables

Figure 1. The European Parliament as of 10.7.2026 4

Table 1. EPP national party comparison with another centre / centre-left party in the European Parliament (overall overlap) 19
Table 2. EPP national party comparison with another right / radical-right party in the European Parliament (overall overlap) 20
Table 3. EPP national party comparison with another centrist / centre-left party in the European Parliament (migration) 22
Table 4. EPP national party comparison with another right / radical-right party in the European Parliament (migration) 22
Table 5. EPP national party comparison with another centrist / centre-left party in the European Parliament (Green Deal and environmental policy) 24
Table 6. EPP national party comparison with another right / radical-right party in the European Parliament (Green Deal and environmental policy) 24
Table 7. EPP national party comparison with another centrist / centre-left party in the European Parliament (agriculture and the CAP) 25
Table 8. EPP national party comparison with another right / radical-right party in the European Parliament (agriculture and the CAP) 26
Table 9. EPP national party comparison with another centrist / centre-left party in the European Parliament (single market) 27
Table 10. EPP national party comparison with another right / radical-right party in the European Parliament (single market) 27
Table 11. EPP national party comparison with another centrist / centre-left party in the European Parliament (foreign policy) 30
Table 12. EPP national party comparison with another right / radical-right party in the European Parliament (foreign policy) 30
Table 13. EPP national party comparison with another centrist / centre-left party in the European Parliament (defence and security) 33
Table 14. EPP national party comparison with another right / radical-right party in the European Parliament (defence and security) 33

1. INTRODUCTION: A *CORDON SANITAIRE* UNDER PRESSURE

Ever since the 2024 European Parliament (EP) elections, the notion of a genuinely influential radical right has appeared in the EP. The reason is simple: it is no longer only the centre majority – made up of the European People's Party (EPP), the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), Renew Europe (Renew), and sometimes the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens) – that can guarantee an absolute majority in votes. A purely right-wing majority can also do so, composed of the EPP, European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), Patriots for Europe (PfE), and Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN).

Indeed, it did not take long for this formation to determine the outcome of a vote. On 19 September 2024, a right-wing majority passed a resolution entitled 'Situation in Venezuela' condemning the Maduro regime, and thus the term 'Venezuela Coalition' was coined. This vote mattered not because of the file itself, but because it challenged assumptions about which majorities could be treated as legitimate in parliamentary decision-making. In traditional, stricter interpretations of the *cordon sanitaire*, for example, relying on the votes of radical-right actors such as the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) to pass a proposal amounts to breaking it. In this case, and then in several others, the EPP – the most influential group in Parliament (see Figure 1) – seemed to move away from this stricter interpretation to one of its own making.

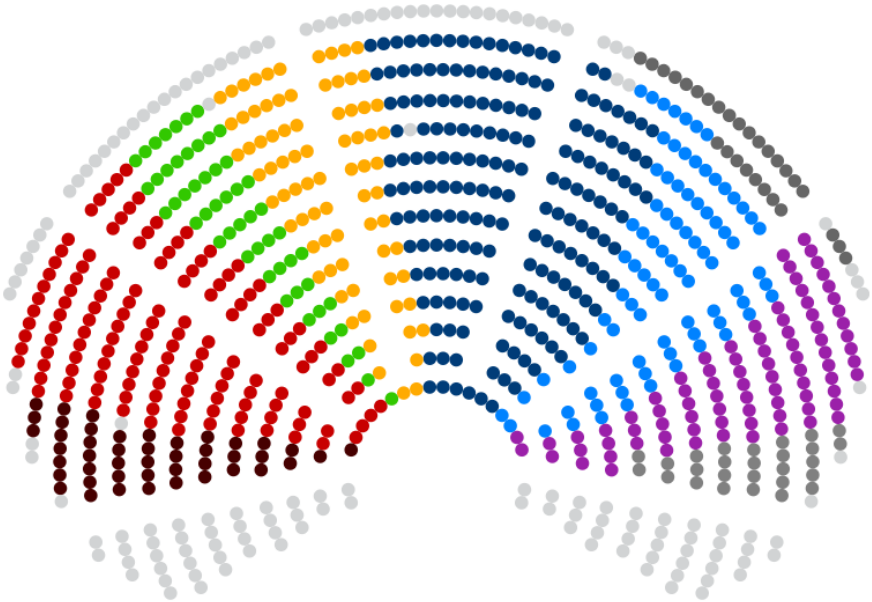
The concern of left-wing actors is that due to ongoing competition and realignment within the right, voter pressure on individual EPP parties might lead to a convergence of policy positions, ultimately ending in the total deconstruction of the *cordon sanitaire* in the EP. The perception is that this has already started happening in notable areas such as migration, deregulation, and, at times, on foreign policy questions (Interviews 4, 5, 7, and 8).

The issue at hand, however, is not so simple. A strict interpretation of the *cordon sanitaire* might presuppose the existence of other, less strict interpretations. EPP President Manfred Weber claims that formal or institutional cooperation (here understood as acknowledged policy alignment with a formal working relationship) with the radical right remains out of the question. In this vein, the group's focus is on returning to the core positions of the EPP and effectively representing the interests of its voters in a parliament where the balance of power has changed (Interview 2).

What further complicates the issue of the *cordon sanitaire* in the EP is that there is no consensus on where it lies. Some left-wing MEPs would prefer the ECR to be excluded, whereas it is now a popular opinion within the EPP that coordination with some parties of the ECR is acceptable, and that the realm of non-cooperation begins with the PfE. Yet even this is not a formal position within the EPP, as there are disagreements between

leading actors: whether the ECR as a whole should be accepted as a political group as long as values align at the group level, or whether one must still differentiate between more acceptable parties, such as Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's party, Fratelli d'Italia (FdI), and sometimes less acceptable ones, such as Poland's Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) (Interviews 2, 3, 4, and 11).

Figure 1. The European Parliament as of 10.7.2026



Source: European Parliament, Interactive seating plan of the hemicycle of the European Parliament (Strasbourg)

Notes: Dark red: The Left (45); Red: S&D (135); Green: Greens/EFA (53); Yellow: Renew (78); Dark blue: EPP (184); Light blue: ECR (84); Purple: PfE (85); Grey: ESN (27); Darker grey: Non-Aligned (28); Rest: Observers.

Within the different interpretations of the *cordon sanitaire* lies the central tension of this whole debate: how the *cordon sanitaire* is defined – or rather, how it should be defined. It is a political tool that first emerged in national politics, and its meaning is still shaped by national context, as in the case of France or Germany (Interviews 12 and 13). In fact, the *cordon sanitaire* is likely shaped by 27 different national contexts. Defining it at the European level is therefore not straightforward, especially as its strictness and boundaries are changing dynamically as the radical right strengthens and political actors respond in different ways. As such, there is no definition of the *cordon sanitaire* – there are only *definitions* in plural.

At its core, a *cordon sanitaire* – or political firewall – always involves some refusal to collaborate with far-right parties. Yet neither aspect of this formula can be defined precisely: which parties should be considered extremist or what should count as 'working with' them depends on the national *and individual political party context*. The German

cordon sanitaire is the strictest, and in theory does not allow any form of cooperation with the far right. By contrast, Dutch, Swedish, and Finnish approaches have been more permissive. In other cases, such as France or Austria, its interpretation has evolved over time. In several Central and Eastern European states, meanwhile, the *cordon* is either non-applicable or simply not politically salient (Interviews 13 and 14).

And so, while in some interpretations, voting together to form an otherwise unavailable majority, drafting proposals together, or allocating posts to far-right parties all fall within the realm of the unacceptable, in other reinterpretations, some of these practices may be treated as permissible.

When analysing the future of the *cordon sanitaire* in the EP, one must start from the premise that there is no single standard definition of the concept. But this does not mean that perceived changes to the *cordon sanitaire*, or attempts to break it, are analytically meaningless. Dominant interpretations can still exist, and if a stricter understanding erodes into a more permissive one, such a shift carries political meaning.

In the current EP, that is exactly what the EPP, Parliament's most influential group, appears to be doing. How the EPP approaches this question, and how this political dynamic develops during the current 10th EP term, is key to the future of the *cordon sanitaire*. The EPP has considerable freedom to decide whether to continue working with the centre majority or to pivot towards a right-wing (including the radical-right) majority, perhaps irreversibly changing the course of European integration in the process.

Nevertheless, according to the EPP, it currently does not prefer to prioritise a right-wing coalition (Interviews 2, 7, and 8). Two very simplified reasons for this are (i) a perceived ideological incompatibility between Christian Democratic conservatism and radical-right conservatism, and (ii) the fact that these groups are, in essence, competing over a similar voter base (Downes & Loveless, 2018).

However, the realm of politics is fluid, and 'everything is possible [in it]' (Interview 4). The goal of this analysis is to assess the claims of the EPP by examining three key areas that could determine whether this process of realignment within the right leads towards the further erosion of the *cordon sanitaire*:

- the political dynamics in the EP on the right, and the strategic incentives of the EPP, ECR, PfE and the ESN (Section 3);
- the policy similarities, differences and alignment between the EPP and the ECR, PfE, and ESN (Section 4); and
- the fight over what conservatism is and should be, and the ideological compatibility or irreconcilability between groups on the right (Section 5).

2. METHODOLOGY

This qualitative political analysis is based on desk research, 14 semi-structured interviews, and the interpretation of processed EP data provided by Eulytix[1].

Desk research relied on a variety of academic sources, with special attention paid to research papers produced by political groups, such as the output of the EPP's Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies. While it will become an important point of this analysis that much depends on the individual parties and their political traditions within EP groups, the Martens Centre's research papers provided a considerable number of formal – if not consensus-based – EPP positions that could be compared with some of the positions of other right-wing EP groups (Interviews 2, 4, and 9). On the latter point, it is a limitation that formal group positions are harder to find to the right of the EPP, since voting is heavily based on national interests in groups such as the ECR, PfE, and ESN (Hix & Cunningham, 2025; Interview 7). That is not to say that there is nothing to compare, nor that some conclusions cannot be drawn without analysing every individual radical-right party in the EP. The behaviour of radical-right parties is notably different, as they tend to rely on a coherent ideology to advance a common political agenda in the EP rather than a common or often constructive policy position.

The 14 semi-structured interviews conducted through February and September 2026 were anonymous and held with targeted MEPs, relevant members of their teams, and think-tank experts familiar with these topics. As shown in this analysis, informal positions and behaviour are crucial to understanding European parliamentary dynamics, something that could only be captured through these anonymous interviews.

An analytical assumption of this analysis, based on desk research and interviews, is that in the medium to long term, much depends on the behaviour of individual EPP parties. Their behaviour will still be shaped by national context (Hix & Cunningham, 2025; Interviews 2, 4, and 12), rather than by the behaviour of the EPP group leadership. In other words, incremental changes driven by shifting national politics, and by an increasing number of coalitions such as the one between Forza Italia, FdI, and Lega, might be a better predictor of future EPP behaviour than, for example, what the EPP leadership says. To partly test this assumption, this analysis interprets processed data provided by Eulytix, on how much overlap there is between an EPP party of a certain nationality, and parties of the same nationality in different groups. Overlap in this case is shown through "overlap ratio". The ratio measures the proportion of EP plenary voting sessions in which two national parties participating in the same vote adopted identical majority voting positions (in favour, against, or abstention). The ratio was calculated by dividing the number of

[1] The data provided by Eulytix to the author is not published and has been provided specifically for this analysis.

voting sessions with matching party-majority positions by the total number of voting sessions in which both parties participated. Values range from 0 (no alignment) to 1 (complete alignment).

A further analytical assumption is that, where EPP parties overlap significantly more with radical-right parties than with centre or centre-left parties, the *cordon sanitaire* is more vulnerable to erosion from a policy-alignment perspective. The rationale behind the selection of specific parties is discussed later in this section. Then, the data on overlap and its interpretation are presented in Section 4.

The dataset used for this analysis, provided by Eulytix, concerns ordinary legislative procedures ('COD' in the EU database), resolutions on topical subjects ('RSP' in the EU database), and own-initiative procedures ('INI' in the EU database) on which MEPs voted during the 10th EP term in the plenary until 24 August 2026, including those that may have started before the current term but were ongoing at the start of the 10th term. It also concerns the result of all votes related to those procedures in the plenary.

In order to process the data, six main topics of interest, or categories, were defined by the author: migration; the Green Deal and environmental policy; agriculture and the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP); the single market; foreign policy; and defence and security. The categorisation of procedures was carried out through a combination of AI and, importantly, individual human validation, based on the official (but often too broad and imprecise) policy-area categorisation provided by EU institutions.

Procedures that did not fit neatly into any of the six predetermined categories remained uncategorised and were not further used. Eulytix then further processed this data to show the extent of overlap in voting behaviour between selected national parties in the EPP and parties of the same nationality in other groups, both overall and across the six predetermined categories.

The selected EPP parties are as follows:

(1) Österreichische Volkspartei (ÖVP) from Austria, which will be compared with Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs (SPÖ) from the S&D, and Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ) from the PfE;

(2) Les Républicains (LR) from France, which will be compared with Renaissance from Renew, and Rassemblement national (RN) from the PfE;

(3) Christlich Demokratische Union (CDU) from Germany, which will be compared with Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD) from the S&D, and Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) from the ESN;

(4) Partidul Național Liberal (PNL) from Romania, which will be compared with Partidul Social Democrat (PSD) from the S&D, and Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor (AUR) from the ECR;

(5) Partido Popular (PP) from Spain, which will be compared with Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) from the S&D, and Vox from the PfE;

(6) Moderata samlingspartiet (Moderata) from Sweden, which will be compared with Socialdemokratiska arbetarpartiet (SAP) from the S&D, and Sverigedemokraterna (SD) from the ECR.

The choice of Member States from which parties were selected was based on a relatively even geographical distribution and population size. Poland was not chosen because the EPP's Platforma Obywatelska (PO) and the ECR's PiS are direct political rivals with little realistic coalition potential under current conditions (Interview 11). Italy was not chosen because its Forza Italia–FdI–Lega governing coalition represents an exceptional national context rather than a typical test case (Interview 9).

For each chosen Member State, the largest EPP party of that Member State was selected. Similarly, the selected right or radical-right party was the largest party to the right of the EPP party in that Member State. The centrist or centre-left comparator parties were selected at the author's discretion, based on expert judgement and the analytical relevance of the case, while acknowledging that this necessarily introduces an element of subjectivity. In Austria, Germany, and Romania, the largest or historically most established centre-left party was selected because of previous or current coalition experience between the relevant EPP and S&D party families. In France, Renaissance was selected because President Emmanuel Macron's centrist project disrupted the traditional left–right divide after 2017 and became the most analytically relevant centrist party. In Spain, although there is no tradition of PP–PSOE coalitions, the PSOE was selected because the PP and PSOE have historically been the two major mainstream parties of Spanish national politics. The logic is similar in Sweden, where the SAP was selected as the main centre-left comparator.

The extent of overlap in voting behaviour between selected national parties in the EPP and parties of the same nationality in other groups should be understood as the proportion of all joint sessions where both parties cast the same majority. In sum, the main unit of comparison in the processed dataset is the national party, rather than the EP groups as a whole. The findings should be read as indicators of voting alignment within selected policy areas, rather than as a complete account of all forms of parliamentary cooperation, especially as the number of procedures and votes within the 10th term may

limit the available data[2]. Furthermore, the statistical findings alone should not immediately be framed as proof of the level of cooperation between the EPP and radical-right parties, but they do have explanatory value.

[2] Where n equals the number of procedures for which all votes were processed in the plenary: agriculture and the CAP (n=40); foreign policy (n=50); the Green Deal and environmental policy (n=19); migration (n=8); defence and security (n=15); and the single market (n=56). The number of votes may include multiple readings as well as amendments, raising the number of votes higher than the number of procedures. The number of votes considered is discussed in Section 4 for all policy categories where data is used.

3. The interests behind weakening the *cordon sanitaire*

For the longest time, EP decision-making was dominated by a grand coalition of the EPP and S&D, later supplemented by Renew or the Greens. However, as discussed in the introduction, the influence of this centrist bloc has been disrupted by the new balance of power in the 10th EP term. With the new possibility of a purely right-wing majority, and the continued rise of radical-right parties across the EU, the issue of the *cordon sanitaire* has become increasingly salient. Consequently, media attention to the majorities used to pass proposals in the EP is possibly higher than ever. Political actors themselves also magnify the division between those inside and outside the *cordon sanitaire*. For example, PfE summits gather national leaders who present themselves as a common opposition, whereas the electoral defeat of Viktor Orbán in Hungary is framed as a victory for all pro-European forces, rather than merely a national issue.

The *cordon sanitaire*'s growing political salience is also visible at the formal parliamentary level. A paper by the European Policy Centre examines how links between MEPs were redrawn from the 9th parliamentary term to the 10th. It shows that the mainstream links of the ECR and PfE – meaning their MEP's connections to centrist groups in terms of co-sponsorships and amendment collaborations – have collapsed, while cross-group sponsorship has also dropped sharply.

Yet it would clearly be wrong to conclude that perceptions of a weakening *cordon sanitaire* in the EP are simply mistaken, something the European Policy Centre's commentary does not do. This raises the question of how to interpret the visible coherence between right-wing EP groups in certain high-profile votes, such as the recent Return Regulation or votes on the first Omnibus proposal.

This tension may partly be resolved by distinguishing between formal or institutional cooperation, which appears to have declined, and informal coordination, which may have become more politically important. According to most of the interviews conducted in preparation for this analysis, some form of the *cordon sanitaire* still holds, but it is based on how the EPP has unilaterally reformulated it. More specifically, formally working together with the radical right is out of the question, but accepting parallel votes from them may be permissible if no formal or institutional cooperation or joint ownership of the proposal takes place (Interviews 1-8, and 14). However, the possibility of low-level coordination has appeared at the informal level. A notable example of this is the aforementioned Return Regulation, with coordination taking place in a WhatsApp group involving actors from the EPP, ECR, PfE, and ESN, facilitated by a Swedish ECR MEP (Interview 8).

Multiple interviewees also point to a concrete practice that shows how informal coordination can work. This practice can take place in some, though not all, EP committees and shadow rapporteur meetings, while in other committees the *cordon sanitaire* may continue to operate more strictly. First, a draft proposal is developed that may be acceptable to all right-wing groups. This is most often done by ECR MEPs, as they are best positioned to prepare a draft text acceptable to both the EPP and PfE or ESN. Then, if the EPP MEP feels that it represents core EPP interests, but that no left-wing-supported majority is available, they may offer to submit the proposal as their own. It is then submitted as such, without the ECR, PfE, or ESN co-signing it, in order to preserve the appearance of the *cordon sanitaire*. Of course, all actors involved ought to know, and expect, that the proposal will still be supported by these groups at the end of the day (Interviews 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8).

This practice, which can occur at the committee level but is highly dependent on the specific committee and individual MEPs involved, breaks the type of *cordon sanitaire* the EPP previously claimed to uphold. And it seemingly even goes against the explicit positions of important Christian Democratic actors such as Weber or German Chancellor Friedrich Merz (Interviews 7, 8 and 13). Nonetheless, it clearly serves the interests of all groups involved. How so?

3.1. THE EPP'S INTERESTS

The political pressures facing the EPP and its member parties are distinctive because the radical right is not only a *cordon sanitaire* problem, but also an electoral and identity-based competitor. The realignment within the right, and the emergence of radical- and extreme-right actors, threaten both the EPP's voter base and its political identity.

These pressures are closely connected. As radical-right parties compete with EPP parties over overlapping electorates, the EPP is weighing whether it has moved too far from the stances of its traditional profile. According to some prominent EPP actors, they fear that, in the 9th EP term leading up to President Ursula von der Leyen's second Commission, the EPP followed an overtly accommodating path towards the left. In doing so, the EPP arguably left behind aspects of its identity on issues such as migration and the Green Deal, even though the latter became a flagship project for von der Leyen, an EPP Commission President (Interviews 2 and 5). In hindsight, EPP actors believe they prompted dissatisfied right-wing voters to migrate to the radical right. As radical-right parties can often occupy an overlapping issue terrain with EPP parties, especially on migration, reversing parts of the Green Deal, and deregulation, pressure is felt within the EPP to sharpen its positions in these areas.

Importantly, the EPP's group perspective is strongly shaped by German Christian Democratic politics (Interview 6). This is reflected in the fact that the CDU is the largest national delegation within the group. Additionally, since 1990, German actors have had significant influence in shaping the path of the group. Arguably, this remains the case today, as three very prominent members of the EPP family are von der Leyen, Weber, and Merz. The strategy and positions of the EPP are heavily influenced by this context. In this German Christian Democratic tradition, political credibility is closely tied to competent policymaking (Interview 12).

This policy-first logic also shapes how the challenge of the radical right is often framed: not primarily as an ideological, cultural, or identity-related challenge, but as a policy challenge. According to one interview with a prominent EPP actor, the radical right has to be defeated on policy, especially economic policy. Even migration was framed in this way in that particular interview, as something that may depress wages in certain cases and thereby generate voter resentment (Interview 3). This type of framing enjoys popularity within the EPP, even if it does not necessarily enjoy consensus. It may also help explain the behaviour of the EPP: from this perspective, what matters is taking the initiative in policymaking, and being first with the proposal to solve a policy issue.

That said, it is currently a sensitive political tightrope to reconcile remaining within the centre majority while still impelling left-wing groups to accept sharpened right-wing policy positions. Interviews suggest that, for some in the EPP, informal coordination with the right becomes more likely when groups to its left are seen by the EPP as unwilling to compromise on files where they consider their position central. This does not necessarily reflect political reality, but rather the EPP's own perspective. In line with this perspective, some EPP MEPs are aware that groups to their right can often be more closely aligned with them on selected policies, which opens the path towards informal coordination with the ECR, PfE, and perhaps even the ESN. According to some interpretations within the EPP, this does not necessarily violate the *cordon sanitaire* in certain cases, provided that no formal or institutional cooperation has taken place – because what matters is that the EPP initiated the policy first, and successfully did so (Interviews 2, 4 and 7).

While it is not the task of this analysis to fully judge the effectiveness of this strategy, it is certainly one that currently appears to shape EPP thinking. From the lens of Christian Democrats, the goal is to restore trust through competent and responsive policymaking – which in this reading, makes proactive agenda control essential. Critics of this mindset, however, would argue that any legitimisation of the radical right is a slippery slope that ultimately increases their political influence with not much to show for it (Interview 12). For their part, the ECR, PfE, and sometimes ESN know that the EPP 'needs the votes' (Interview 5). They have therefore been willing to participate in practices such as the

shadow rapporteur arrangement, since even informal involvement can increase the legitimacy of EP groups behind the *cordon sanitaire*.

From the EPP's perspective, then, informal coordination can appear less as a break with the *cordon sanitaire* than as a proactive way to preserve agenda control under changed parliamentary conditions. Still, this is a position that erodes the *cordon sanitaire* – and breaks the type of *cordon* that the EPP had previously held itself to.

3.2. THE ECR'S INTERESTS

Perhaps one of the greatest beneficiaries of the shifting balance of power in the EP is the ECR. Positioned as the middle piece between traditional conservative and more radical actors, and with no absolutely clear consensus even within EPP circles as to where it belongs, the ECR occupies a crucial hinge role between the EPP and the PfE. This is strengthened by substantial policy alignment with the EPP (Interviews 2 and 14). Indeed, one important claim made in an interview conducted for this analysis was that this alignment is not new: had the balance of power allowed it, the EPP would have worked more closely with the ECR even in previous terms. The ECR's acceptability to some in the EPP is also rooted in its political history. It has not traditionally been understood as part of the radical right. Before Brexit, it was founded by the British Conservatives, after they left the EPP in 2009 (Interviews 1, 2 and 4).

The context now, of course, is very different. The group is currently dominated by two parties: Meloni's FdI and Poland's PiS (Interview 5). Both have faced substantial criticism for their political positions: FdI for carrying a neo-fascist and nationalist heritage, and PiS for taking a populist, illiberal path alongside Hungary's Fidesz in the 2010s (Interview 11). PiS also remains (for now) the main rival of Prime Minister Donald Tusk's Platforma Obywatelska, which further complicates cooperation between the EPP and ECR.

By contrast, Meloni is currently a highly sought-after partner for the EPP, despite what some might consider problematic political traditions and domestic policy choices (Interviews 1 and 4). Due to her more pro-European outlook, she is considered part of the 'constructive right', a term that will become important in Section 5 on ideological affinity (Interview 3). She is therefore a radical-right political actor whom the EPP is willing to bring closer to its side. Indeed, a more cynical interpretation of the *cordon sanitaire* is that it lies where 'the Germans' want it to lie. In this reading, since 'the Germans' want Meloni in, but perhaps PiS out, the *cordon sanitaire* runs through the ECR (Interviews 3, 4, 5 and 6).

Furthermore, the Italian case provides important context for understanding the possible future of the *cordon sanitaire*. The Forza Italia–FdI–Lega governing coalition already includes parties from the EPP, ECR, and PfE. In practice, this makes cooperation between

these parties at the European level far less exceptional (Interviews 4 and 6). Indeed, a pivotal claim of this analysis is that, should more governing coalitions of this kind emerge in Member States, it could be these incremental steps, rather than EP group-level decisions, which lead to the continued erosion of the *cordon sanitaire*.

Yet the ECR's strategic importance should not obscure some of its internal fragility. It is hard to assess the internal coherence of the ECR, because it has no formal 'whipping system', or mechanism for punishing parties that do not vote along group lines. Formally, every member party may vote according to national interests (Interview 5). Informally, however, there is a debate among its member parties over whether the group should turn more towards the EPP or towards the PfE. Both options remain possible, which makes cooperation with the ECR highly valuable to both the EPP and the PfE (Interviews 5 and 6).

For the EPP, there have been repeated attempts to persuade certain parties to join its group, or, if that fails, at least to ensure that they remain more aligned with the EPP than with groups further to the right. In the case of Meloni, while it was not confirmed in an interview whether the EPP has reached out to FdI, Meloni's possible problem in closer relations was mentioned: in the ECR, FdI is an important hinge partner; in the EPP, it would be just another party (Interview 4).

For the PfE, expansion towards the ECR is the next logical step. Attempts were made to unite the two groups right after the 2024 EP elections, but they failed. The reason for this is likely the ECR's split when it comes to political affinity. This was explained through a 'bookshelf' example in an interview: if the ECR is imagined as a bookshelf, there is room for some books on either side. Adding too many on one side, however, would make some fall off the other side (Interview 5). Currently, any attempt to pull the ECR decisively towards either the EPP or the PfE risks alienating parties on the opposite side of the group. This internal fragility is precisely what makes the ECR so important. The actor that gains greater influence over the ECR may also gain greater influence over the future shape of right-wing cooperation in the EP (Interview 7).

3.3. THE INTERESTS OF THE PFE AND THE ESN

Although the PfE and the ESN are two separate groups and do not behave identically, these two groups can be discussed in the same subsection on the basis that they often share similar strategic incentives, even if they remain organisationally distinct. Most parties represented in these two groups share a broad ideological affinity in their worldview, as well as a similar political strategy derived from it. They tend to reject liberal universalism, emphasise sovereignty in ways that often sit uneasily with prevailing interpretations of EU law, and oppose a stronger role for EU institutions at the expense of

Member States. They also tend to adopt a more reactionary form of conservatism than Christian Democrats, view international relations through a realist lens, and vote along the lines of national interest.

Interestingly, however, the PfE appears to place greater emphasis than the ECR or the ESN on internal coherence and the external perception of unity. Compared with the ESN, the PfE also plays the parliamentary game more actively, vying for positions and presenting itself as an active political player (Interview 7). This may be because its cohesion is grounded less in shared policy positions than in a broader common political agenda. Part of this agenda, in turn, can be understood as 'crisis entrepreneurship' – a flexible form of political positioning in which opponents are criticised 'from whichever angle best suits the moment' (Interviews 1 and 10). In practice, for example, this means the PfE is more likely to support proposals that erode EU regulatory power in selected areas, or restore Member State control, as in the case of migration.

The PfE, and to some extent the ESN, often presents itself as the main opposition in the EP. This resembles political strategies at the Member State level, where such anti-establishment parties can downplay their political responsibility and amplify their political mythos by presenting themselves as challengers and underdogs. The *cordon sanitaire* reinforces this role, allowing them, from their perspective, to present themselves as legitimate victims of exclusion. At the same time, the *cordon sanitaire* is more of a curse than a 'blessing'. It shuts them out of political power, limiting their influence in the EP primarily to discourse rather than concrete proposals (Interviews 5 and 7).

A central strategic objective of the PfE and ESN, therefore, is to break the *cordon sanitaire* in Parliament and, if successful, erode the power of the EPP to their own advantage. For this, legitimisation is crucial, which is why the PfE might be willing to support a proposal that it cannot formally co-sign. The perception that the EPP works with the PfE may be as valuable as formal proof of it.

In terms of coherence and organisation, the PfE is heavily dependent on Hungary's Fidesz. It is widely argued in Hungarian political circles, and was also confirmed in interviews, that the Hungarian MEPs are among the group's main organisers (Interviews 4, 7, and 8). By contrast, the French RN appears less interested in European parliamentary politics as such, beyond using the advantages of a larger group to better defend its own French political interests (Interview 8). Nonetheless, the RN remains influential by virtue of its size: it is the biggest party in the PfE. This influence was visible in the exclusion of the AfD, which the RN did not want to include due to controversies surrounding AfD MEPs, with even the RN perceiving them as too extreme. This exclusion helps explain why the AfD was forced to create the ESN, and why the two groups remain organisationally separate despite their broader strategic affinities (Interviews 1 and 8).

More broadly, it further shows that questions of acceptability not only divide the EPP from the radical right, but also structure relations within the radical and extreme right itself. This same logic can help explain why the PfE ultimately failed to unite with the ECR during this parliamentary term.

3.4. The EPP's changed terms of cooperation do not exist in a vacuum

Whereas this analysis examines the changing right-wing dynamic in the EP, the EPP's altered position and claims do not exist in a vacuum – and its arguments should therefore not be accepted uncritically.

By its own admission, the EPP has broken with its previous approach to cooperation with the left. Whatever the reasons for this shift, it is not without consequences: changing the terms on which the EPP is willing to cooperate with other political groups also means departing from positions and constraints that it had previously imposed on itself. One of these constraints was the strict interpretation of the *cordon sanitaire*, shaped in part by German influence within the EPP.

The new balance of power within the EP allows the EPP to behave like, according to Sophia Russack and Nicolai von Ondarza, 'something well-known in national settings: a minority government, in this case with the EPP as kingmaker'. In this position, it can seek majorities both with the centre and with the radical right. From a critical perspective, this gives the EPP leverage over its traditional allies – by signalling that it may otherwise turn to the radical right, the EPP can push the S&D, Renew, and the Greens closer to its own positions. In this sense, the erosion of the *cordon sanitaire* becomes a bargaining tool. Departing from its previous position on the *cordon* does not appear to be something that was forced on the EPP by the new balance of power, but an active tactical choice through which it seeks to preserve agenda control. And so, while EPP actors might argue that they do not have a choice, others would argue that they do. The dilemma is contested, with different actors interpreting the same political constraints in different ways.

Beyond casting aside the type of *cordon sanitaire* the EPP had previously held itself to, this tactic could present several additional problems according to some interviewees. First, it may simply not work. While it clearly offers short-term tactical advantages, cooperation with the radical right has historically not worked out well for EPP parties in the long term. Second, there is an argument that the *cordon sanitaire* is not only about keeping the radical right out of power, but also about denying it the political ground to become influential. By focusing solely on formal cooperation, the EPP's reformulation of the *cordon* may defeat its purpose (Interviews 1, 12 and 13). As further explained in Section 5, there are also grounds to argue that the EPP is playing into the hands of the radical right by doing this.

3.5. ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT

While there have been some examples of movement between the EPP, ECR, and PfE, and the ESN in the 10th term, these have mostly concerned individual MEPs rather than larger parties. The EPP remains secure as the largest group, while any merger to its right would likely create more internal strife than most of the parties involved could bear (Interviews 4, 5 and 7). There is thus a precarious balance on the right, whose future will depend partly on developments beyond the EP itself.

National elections may be key to changing this balance. The formation of governing coalitions that cut across these party families, such as Forza Italia–FdI–Lega in Italy, may represent incremental steps towards the continued erosion of the *cordon sanitaire*. According to some interviewees, this prospect is known within the EPP. The next national elections with potential relevance for the *cordon sanitaire* in the EP are the Spanish elections, where a PP–Vox coalition is possible; the same applies, though more indirectly, to the French presidential and Polish parliamentary elections (Interviews 2 and 4). Until such national-level shifts alter the political dynamics between groups, informal coordination in individual cases remains the most likely form of right-wing cooperation in the EP.

As seen in the previous subsections examining the strategic incentives of the EPP, ECR, PfE and ESN, all groups can benefit from the informal coordination that may occur in specific cases at the committee level. The EPP can preserve agenda control; the ECR can play an important mediating role; and the PfE or ESN can legitimise themselves. It is striking, however, how different the approaches of the EPP and the PfE are. As an extension of national political strategies, the former may believe it can regain popularity through effective policymaking, while the latter may believe that advancing a political agenda (which does not necessarily have real substance) is more effective than policymaking. The success of these two strategies may be mutually exclusive: if EPP parties can restore trust through policymaking, they weaken the PfE's anti-establishment appeal; if the radical right continues to strengthen, it calls the EPP's policy-first approach into question. In both scenarios, the *cordon sanitaire* risks being further eroded.

All the same, whether through policy or politics, the testing ground for these strategies will be specific policy areas.

4. POLICY ALIGNMENT ON THE RIGHT REMAINS SELECTIVE, NOT STRUCTURAL

The institutional arrangement of the EU places the European Parliament in a unique position compared with national parliaments. While the EP is a legislative decision-maker, mainly through the ordinary legislative procedure, it can neither decide alone without the Council nor propose legislative acts itself instead of the Commission[3]. Because the EP is institutionally limited in formal agenda-setting, it often uses resolutions or own-initiative reports to shape political debate before or around formal decision-making. These signal the opinion of Parliament without being legally binding. This format is especially common in foreign policy as the EP has no official competences. But there are also many other cases where the EP seeks to proactively shape the agenda even before decision-making reaches its formal stage, enabling it to present itself as an active and legitimate institution (Rosén & Raube, 2018).

Moreover, the 'second-order nature' of EP elections continues to affect parliamentary decision-making (Hix & Cunningham, 2025). Because EP elections are often shaped by national political dynamics, MEP behaviour also remains strongly influenced by domestic considerations. This can be seen in cases where national political pressures override group-level positioning, such as the vote on delaying action on the EU–Mercosur treaty by requesting an opinion from the Court of Justice of the EU. In that case, the majority of EPP parties voted for the motion, even though the official position of the EPP was to support the implementation of the treaty. Even broader policy documents, such as the extended 7D's for Sustainability by the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, must be taken with a grain of salt. Although they discuss a wide range of EPP policy preferences, they can also be interpreted as a wish list by more liberal EPP authors (Interview 1).

The point here is that, in some cases, parliamentary activity serves less as concrete policymaking than as political signalling. Votes may express broader political preferences rather than stable policy commitments, while national interests and internal divisions can sometimes make it difficult to draw firm conclusions about the substantive policy preferences of EP groups (Costello & Thomson, 2014). This is a limitation of any analysis that aims to discuss the common policy preferences of any one group, let alone multiple groups at the same time.

However, this does not mean that there are no broader sentiments, preferences, or agendas. Clearly, there are. It also reinforces a previous point: due to the aforementioned

[3] Own-initiative reports (INI) are one way for the European Parliament to seek to influence the Commission in such cases.

differences in national context, data wise, the future of the *cordon sanitaire* is best analysed through individual examples of converging policy preferences between EPP parties and their national counterparts in the ECR, PfE, and ESN (Interviews 2 and 4).

In this section, six different policy areas are analysed: migration; the Green Deal and environmental policy; agriculture and the CAP; the single market; foreign policy; defence and security; and additionally, demography. All but demography – a policy area reserved as a prospective matter – are supported by data on how many EPP parties overlap with their national counterparts from other groups. In each subsection, the first layer of analysis focuses on broader policy preferences and political agendas across groups. Then, overlap between the selected EPP parties with their national counterparts from other groups is discussed.

As a baseline, the overall overlap, based on all votes (ignoring categorisation, including all procedures, regardless of type), merits discussion.

Table 1. EPP national party comparison with another centre / centre-left party in the European Parliament (overall overlap)

Country	EPP national party	Other national party	Overlap ratio (all joint sessions)
Austria	ÖVP	SPÖ	0.75
France	LR	Renaissance	0.63
Germany	CDU	SPD	0.78
Romania	PNL	PSD	0.80
Spain	PP	PSOE	0.75
Sweden	Moderata	SAP	0.76

Source: data provided by Eulytix.

Table 2. EPP national party comparison with another right / radical-right party in the European Parliament (overall overlap)

Country	EPP national party	Other national party	Overlap ratio (all joint sessions)
Austria	ÖVP	FPÖ	0.30
France	LR	RN	0.53
Germany	CDU	AfD	0.32
Romania	PNL	AUR	0.46
Spain	PP	Vox	0.42
Sweden	Moderata	SD	0.50

Source: data provided by Eulytix.

Considering all votes on all procedures, regardless of type or category, some clear tendencies already emerge. In the cases of the Austrian ÖVP and German CDU, the difference between the overlap ratio with the centre-left party and with the radical-right party is high: 0.45 and 0.46 points respectively. This suggests lower alignment with parties to their right across procedures. For the Romanian PNL and Spanish PP, this distance remains significant, at 0.34 and 0.33 points respectively, but is somewhat lower. In the case of Moderata, whose minority government in Sweden was supported by the Sweden Democrats from outside the government, the difference is lower still, at 0.26 points.

In France, by contrast, there is hardly any difference in alignment in procedures, with only a 0.10-point gap between the overlap ratio of LR–Renaissance and LR–RN. The French case also highlights an important limitation: national context matters. Data provided by Eulytix, but not presented here for reasons of scope, suggests that this low difference broadly applies to other French parties in the EP as well. This may indicate, and would support one interview claim, that French parties are unusual in being disciplined more by national voting patterns than by group-level alignment (Interviews 8 and 12).

A further limitation is that these numbers, while illustrative, group together all policy fields. This makes it impossible to determine from the overall figures alone whether alignment is higher in some categories than in others. The following pages therefore turn to the predefined policy categories and examine alignment within them.

4.1. MIGRATION

Perhaps one of the most salient topics in the EP is migration. It is politically consequential at both the national and European levels. At the national level, Member States have to deal with the effects of irregular migration and its cultural dimensions. At the European level, the future of Schengen and external border control are central to the debate. It is also an issue that has remained practically 'unsolved' since the 2014–15 migration and refugee crisis, not least because even recently accepted proposals, such as the Migration Pact, are still encountering heavy Member State resistance.

Migration has also been a driving force behind the rise of the radical right. Beyond its policy dimension, it carries strong cultural and identity-based implications, which radical-right parties have been able to connect to broader feelings of insecurity, resentment, and loss of control (Krastev, 2017; Krastev & Holmes, 2019). Accordingly, migration is a particularly pertinent topic for them. It is one area where a common political agenda could be constructed on the radical right, and where it can be suggested with considerable confidence that the ECR, PfE, and ESN share a common agenda.

The issue of migration has also led the parties of the EPP to change course, now exhibiting markedly different behaviour compared with 10 years ago. Purely from a political angle, EPP parties are facing the fact that there is significant competition over their core voter bases at the national level between them and parties to their right. As such, EPP parties have adopted a considerably harder line on migration. Even so, whereas the radical right may use migration primarily as a political identity issue, the EPP still frames it as a policy problem to be managed, which is visible, for example, in arguments that migration may have negative economic effects on the working class. This approach is driving some voters towards radical-right parties (Interview 3). It is also visible in the growing realisation that integration policies matter, and that labour-market integration alone may be insufficient. The economically positive effects of migration are not denied; however, controlled migration is now placed at the forefront.

Policy alignment on the right side of the EP is expected to be higher on migration because the EPP and the radical right can support similar measures for different reasons. Radical-right parties are willing to back proposals that advance their broader anti-migration agenda, even when these measures are not 'radical enough' for some of them. The EPP, by contrast, frames the same issue as one of effective policy response and controlled migration. Meanwhile, the gap between EPP and left-wing positions on migration has widened, with the EPP viewing left-wing groups as unwilling to accommodate the EPP's core demands. Without adjudicating the merits of the EPP's position, this dynamic may nevertheless push the EPP towards eroding the *cordon sanitaire* through migration-related votes and informal coordination.

Table 3. EPP national party comparison with another centrist / centre-left party in the European Parliament (migration)

Country	EPP national party	Other national party	Overlap ratio (all joint sessions)
Austria	ÖVP	SPÖ	0.61
France	LR	Renaissance	0.36
Germany	CDU	SPD	0.61
Romania	PNL	PSD	0.46
Spain	PP	PSOE	0.50
Sweden	Moderata	SAP	0.75

Source: data provided by Eulytix.

Table 4. EPP national party comparison with another right / radical-right party in the European Parliament (migration)

Country	EPP national party	Other national party	Overlap ratio (all joint sessions)
Austria	ÖVP	FPÖ	0.46
France	LR	RN	0.86
Germany	CDU	AfD	0.46
Romania	PNL	AUR	0.57
Spain	PP	Vox	0.46
Sweden	Moderata	SD	0.54

Source: data provided by Eulytix.

The statistical data on migration immediately suggests two things. First, the number of actual votes (28) on ordinary legislative procedures, resolutions or INI procedures on migration-related matters in the 10th term remains low, despite the issue's salience. As a result, these figures are not statistically significant on their own. Still, the overall pattern of higher overlap between EPP–centrist / centre-left and lower overlap between EPP–right / radical-right breaks. In some cases, like in France and Romania, the EPP party aligns more with the radical-right party than the centre-left party. The figures therefore support the qualitative finding that migration is one of the clearest areas of right-wing alignment,

while also requiring caution because of the small number of votes. In this case, qualitative desk research, and the fact that migration has been a major area of right-wing cooperation, provides more robust findings than the statistics from the 10th term alone.

4.2. GREEN DEAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY

Other than migration, the Green Deal and EU environmental policy may be one of the most politicised areas in which right-wing cooperation becomes possible. This was already visible in the vote on the first Omnibus proposal. Despite being the flagship project of the first von der Leyen Commission, fears of deindustrialisation, regulatory burdens, and declining competitiveness have pushed many parties to reconsider their position. From this perspective, the Green Deal is not only an environmental issue, but also an economic one, especially for industrial actors that have traditionally been important stakeholders for right-wing groups.

For the EPP, the key goal is that the Green Deal must be rationalised (Interview 2): red tape and regulatory burdens should be reduced in order to safeguard the competitiveness of European industry. This framing matters because the EPP does not present itself as abandoning climate policy or sustainability. Rather, it argues that these goals must be balanced against competitiveness. At the same time, this is one of the areas where EPP MEPs believe they have been too accommodating to left-wing groups, and are only now returning to 'core EPP interests' (Interview 2). This also explains why this category bundles together the Green Deal and environmental policy more broadly. In the current political context, many environmental files are no longer treated solely as climate or sustainability questions, but as part of a wider debate about competitiveness, deregulation, industrial policy, and the regulatory reach of the EU.

The radical right's agenda may overlap with this, but it is not necessarily the same. For some radical-right actors, the agenda is close to the EPP's, even if more far-reaching. For others, especially those sceptical of climate science or the phase-out of fossil fuels, the goal is closer to the deconstruction of the Green Deal and opposition to 'bureaucracy' as such (Interviews 7 and 8). This means that high EPP–radical-right alignment should not automatically be expected across the whole category. Yet, as the Omnibus proposal shows, environmental policy is increasingly also about deregulation, where right-wing parties can align.

This is not the first 'deregulation spree' in the EU, but it may be the first in which radical-right actors have a genuine role in shaping EU legislation. As with migration, radical-right actors may support EPP initiatives even when they consider them insufficiently radical. Doing so still advances their broader political agenda and helps legitimise right-wing majorities in a policy-heavy area.

Table 5. EPP national party comparison with another centrist / centre-left party in the European Parliament (Green Deal and environmental policy)

Country	EPP national party	Other national party	Overlap ratio (all joint sessions)
Austria	ÖVP	SPÖ	0.73
France	LR	Renaissance	0.63
Germany	CDU	SPD	0.78
Romania	PNL	PSD	0.81
Spain	PP	PSOE	0.70
Sweden	Moderata	SAP	0.77

Source: data provided by Eulytix.

Table 6. EPP national party comparison with another right / radical-right party in the European Parliament (Green Deal and environmental policy)

Country	EPP national party	Other national party	Overlap ratio (all joint sessions)
Austria	ÖVP	FPÖ	0.38
France	LR	RN	0.54
Germany	CDU	AfD	0.36
Romania	PNL	AUR	0.46
Spain	PP	Vox	0.40
Sweden	Moderata	SD	0.42

Source: data provided by Eulytix.

The number of processed votes is high enough, around 384, for these results to have explanatory value. Overall, the overlap ratios suggest two things. First, policy alignment between EPP parties and right or radical-right parties is slightly more meaningful in this area compared with overall alignment. Second, EPP parties still remain significantly more aligned with centrist or centre-left parties than with radical-right parties. This suggests that policy positions on the right can converge, but mainly in selective, high-profile cases rather than across the policy area as a whole. Beyond files framed around deregulation or

competitiveness, the motivations of EPP, ECR, PfE, and ESN parties still differ, especially when it comes to environmental policy.

4.3. AGRICULTURE AND THE CAP

The policy question of agriculture and the CAP may seem like a very unusual choice for this analysis, especially since cohesion policy is not included. However, it is worth discussing for two reasons. First, it is a policy area where politics can be as important as policy, as the farmers' protests and the controversy around the EU–Mercosur treaty have clearly shown. Farmers are a small but influential stakeholder group in the EU, and parties on the right often treat them as an electorally and symbolically important constituency (Interview 10).

Second, the period preceding the current negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) is crucial for the future of the CAP. There have been extensive policy arguments about the need to gradually decrease its budgetary share and importance within the seven-year budget in order to leave room for new priorities. In the current draft MFF proposal, the Commission has also proposed ending the CAP as a separate budgetary category and integrating it into the larger National and Regional Partnership Fund instead. This is controversial among many Member States; Parliament has been involved in the debate and is likely to remain so. These two reasons make agriculture and the CAP a useful test case for assessing whether right-wing policy overlap extends beyond the more obvious areas (Interview 5).

Table 7. EPP national party comparison with another centrist / centre-left party in the European Parliament (agriculture and the CAP)

Country	EPP national party	Other national party	Overlap ratio (all joint sessions)
Austria	ÖVP	SPÖ	0.54
France	LR	Renaissance	0.55
Germany	CDU	SPD	0.48
Romania	PNL	PSD	0.62
Spain	PP	PSOE	0.60
Sweden	Moderata	SAP	0.53

Source: data provided by Eulytix.

Table 8. EPP national party comparison with another right / radical-right party in the European Parliament (agriculture and the CAP)

Country	EPP national party	Other national party	Overlap ratio (all joint sessions)
Austria	ÖVP	FPÖ	0.60
France	LR	RN	0.69
Germany	CDU	AfD	0.39
Romania	PNL	AUR	0.43
Spain	PP	Vox	0.62
Sweden	Moderata	SD	0.71

Source: data provided by Eulytix.

The number of processed votes for agriculture and the CAP is around 146, giving the results some explanatory value. Similar to the area of migration, the results break the overall overlap pattern. For the Austrian ÖVP, alignment with the FPÖ is higher in the EP than alignment with the SPÖ. At first glance, this points to the kind of incremental policy-level shift discussed earlier, through which the *cordon sanitaire* may erode in specific national-party constellations. A similar logic may also apply to the French LR, the Spanish PP, and the Swedish Moderata. In the cases of France and Spain, agriculture and the CAP are especially salient national priorities, given the structural weight of agriculture in both countries and their governments' repeated emphasis on preserving a strong CAP.

However, if alignment were driven by national priority alone, one would expect this to produce uniformly high overlap across national parties. Instead, the data shows only moderate overlap overall, with alignment between the EPP party and the party to its right only somewhat stronger in France and only marginally stronger in Spain. A similar observation can be made for the other Member States. That said, agriculture and the CAP do appear to be areas where right-wing overlap is possible, but also dependent on individual national examples.

4.4. Single market

Procedures concerning the single market are broad. That is because proposals in this area can be highly technocratic in nature and often lack a significant political agenda behind them. This is precisely why the single market can serve as a useful litmus test for possible overlap between right-wing parties in Parliament. If the starting point is that the EPP primarily pushes policy, while groups to its right primarily push politics, then this should

be reflected in lower overlap between EPP parties and parties to their right (Interview 10). Conversely, if serious policy coordination is possible between specific parties, it should also be visible in highly technocratic areas. It ought to be mentioned that while the broader policy positions of the EPP and the radical right may be comparable on account of being right-wing parties, the radical right is divisive on the overall economic philosophy. Some adopt a more neoliberal approach, while others favour stronger state intervention.

Table 9. EPP national party comparison with another centrist / centre-left party in the European Parliament (single market)

Country	EPP National Party	Other National Party	Overlap Ratio (all joint sessions)
Austria	ÖVP	SPÖ	0.84
France	LR	Renaissance	0.67
Germany	CDU	SPD	0.87
Romania	PNL	PSD	0.86
Spain	PP	PSOE	0.85
Sweden	Moderata	SAP	0.85

Source: data provided by Eulytix.

Table 10. EPP national party comparison with another right / radical-right party in the European Parliament (single market)

Country	EPP national party	Other national party	Overlap ratio (all joint sessions)
Austria	ÖVP	FPÖ	0.24
France	LR	RN	0.44
Germany	CDU	AfD	0.29
Romania	PNL	AUR	0.36
Spain	PP	Vox	0.27
Sweden	Moderata	SD	0.35

Source: data provided by Eulytix.

The number of processed votes for the single market is around 352, giving the results explanatory value. As expected, when debates enter the realm of more technocratic policy, with little overt political signalling, the possibility for right-wing alignment fades. In this area, alignment between EPP parties and centrist or centre-left parties is high, while alignment between EPP parties and parties to their right is low. France is the partial exception, although even there the gap remains higher than usual.

These statistics reinforce the claim that EPP parties are more likely to align with centrist or centre-left parties on technocratic policy files, while right and radical-right parties often diverge when the issue lacks a clear political-signalling function. Granted, there may also be a rational policy reason why parties to the right of the EPP reject more technocratic procedures: such procedures often expand the EU's regulatory role or at least deepen its involvement in market governance. Yet even this interpretation highlights the significant differences between EPP parties and those to their right. It also anticipates a point that will be developed in Section 5, that these parties often remain incompatible in their perspectives of the EU.

4.5. Foreign policy

Foreign policy is one of the more important areas in which the future relationship between the EPP, ECR, PfE, and ESN can be analysed. There are several reasons for this. One is that the first major instance of these groups' joint voting behaviour concerned a foreign policy resolution, the 'Situation in Venezuela' – from which the Venezuela Coalition derived its name. Furthermore, the EP as an institution often seeks to position itself as an active foreign policy actor through resolutions, despite having less influence over foreign policy than other EU institutions. In other words, this foreign policy activism can, in theory, increase the number of possible instances of alignment between right-wing groups (Interviews 4, 6, 7 and 8).

At the same time, precisely because foreign policy covers a very wide range of issues, broad claims about alignment are difficult to make. The primary aim of the qualitative discussion is not to assess foreign policy alignment as a whole, but to identify central issues that may generate similar or divergent responses from these groups before turning to the more aggregated data. To keep the analysis reasonably limited in scope, three critical foreign policy examples are discussed, alongside related questions such as enlargement and qualified majority voting at the end.

On two of the most pertinent foreign policy issues at the time of writing this analysis, Ukraine and transatlantic relations, there does not seem to be sufficient alignment for a right-wing majority. On Ukraine, the EPP and ECR support the same basic position, even if their approaches may differ. The ECR was even described in one interview as 'the most

pro-Ukraine group' (Interview 5). By contrast, the PfE is far more divided, with significant scepticism towards Ukraine's EU accession and towards the EU's wider approach to Russia. The ESN, for its part, is anti-Ukraine. Since support from the ECR alone is not enough to create a right-wing majority, Ukraine is therefore an area where the EPP is likely to remain aligned with the centre majority rather than turn to the groups further to its right (Interview 2).

On matters of the transatlantic relationship, relations between the European centre-right and the current US administration have become more strained. Simultaneously, and somewhat paradoxically, relations between some on the radical right and the Trump administration have improved, even though many radical-right parties (especially from the PfE and the ESN) had been intensely critical of previous US administrations for years (Interview 2). This more positive relationship with MAGA can be understood as a form of 'tactical transatlanticism'. Since the Trump administration shares anti-liberal and other ideological positions with some of the radical right, some of these parties have aligned themselves more closely with it in the hope that this will support their own political agendas (Interview 10).

However, because some radical-right actors from the EU reject the US's traditional role in international relations and remain sceptical of purely Western forms of cooperation, this shift does not seem permanent. There is also internal division over this approach, including within the PfE. By comparison, Christian Democratic thinking has traditionally treated the transatlantic relationship as a core part of European foreign policy (Interview 2).

By contrast, the Middle East may become an example of a region where issue-specific right-wing majorities could emerge, not unlike the Venezuela vote, even if this does not amount to a stable foreign policy coalition (Interview 8). Issues concerning Israel, Palestine, and, more recently, Iran may be too divisive to allow for broad claims about group alignment. Nevertheless, multiple interviews point to a broader tendency: the growing divide between left-wing groups and the EPP over pragmatic foreign-relations building in the region. The EPP increasingly appears willing to prioritise strategic partnerships over certain human rights-related priorities and conditionalities. This divide once again opens the way for the EPP to pivot towards other right-wing groups for majorities. According to multiple interviews, this possibility seems realistic in relation to some Middle Eastern countries, like Egypt or Morocco (Interviews 4, 7 and 8).

Last but not least, there seems to be little room for alignment on more general foreign policy questions, such as reforms to Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) or enlargement. Even the EPP appears divided on proposals such as qualified majority voting on the CFSP, despite support by Weber. Positions on enlargement, meanwhile, remain

heavily dependent on the specific national contexts and individual interests of Member States (Interviews 8, 10 and 11).

Table 11. EPP national party comparison with another centrist / centre-left party in the European Parliament (foreign policy)

Country	EPP national party	Other national party	Overlap ratio (all joint sessions)
Austria	ÖVP	SPÖ	0.79
France	LR	Renaissance	0.58
Germany	CDU	SPD	0.82
Romania	PNL	PSD	0.82
Spain	PP	PSOE	0.81
Sweden	Moderata	SAP	0.79

Source: data provided by Eulytix.

Table 12. EPP national party comparison with another right / radical-right party in the European Parliament (foreign policy)

Country	EPP national party	Other national party	Overlap ratio (all joint sessions)
Austria	ÖVP	FPÖ	0.20
France	LR	RN	0.52
Germany	CDU	AfD	0.29
Romania	PNL	AUR	0.46
Spain	PP	Vox	0.38
Sweden	Moderata	SD	0.58

Source: data provided by Eulytix.

The number of processed votes for foreign policy is around 783, giving the results significant explanatory value. In almost all cases, the results follow the overall overlap pattern: EPP parties are more aligned with their centrist or centre-left national counterparts than with parties to their right. The only partial exception is once again France, where LR's alignment with the RN comes relatively close to its alignment with

Renaissance. In Sweden, alignment between Moderata and the SD is moderate in absolute terms, but still lower than alignment between Moderata and the SAP. This suggests that foreign policy may still generate politically salient moments of right-wing cooperation, especially on specific votes. However, major differences on issues such as Ukraine, Russia, and transatlantic relations make broader foreign policy alignment on the right unlikely. As such, foreign policy is more likely to limit than enable substantial right-wing realignment in the EP.

4.6. Defence and security

A war in the EU's neighbourhood, a changing geopolitical context, and tensions with the Trump administration have brought defence and security to the forefront. Uncertainty over the future role of the US in NATO, together with pressure to rebuild European defence industries, is pushing the EU into a more active security role. This marks a significant shift in European integration. After the failure of the European Defence Community in 1954, defence and security were largely taken off the agenda, while NATO became the basis of most defence cooperation in Europe.

These changes are now visible in several overlapping developments: the Readiness 2030 initiative; the creation of SAFE, a new EU instrument providing up to EUR 150 billion in loans for defence investment and common procurement; the growing importance of energy security; and a rapid increase of defence spending across Member States. In addition are renewed debates about how far Europeans should build defence structures that can operate alongside, or in some cases compensate for, NATO (Interview 2). Defence and security have therefore become policy areas where industrial policy, strategic autonomy, and transatlantic relations increasingly overlap.

The EPP has also clearly designated defence and security as a new priority (Interview 2). Through sponsored research papers, official group positions, and statements by actors such as Weber or EPP-affiliated Commissioners like Andrius Kubilius, it has called for several reforms that might have seemed far-fetched even 10 years ago. These include more joint procurement of military equipment, European lend-lease programmes, using the MFF as a basis for defence projects, an EU Security Council, and common European military models. Even this does not exhaust the agenda. The question of a common European army has also reopened and is unlikely to disappear. Furthermore, the EPP wishes to integrate Ukraine into the defence of the EU, while expecting that reliance on the US may decline regardless of the political outcome in Washington (Interview 2). Importantly, a 'Made in Europe' component in joint procurement is often highlighted, fitting into a broader strategic-autonomy agenda.

This agenda is unlikely to be supported by a full right-wing majority in the EP. The ECR, and especially Polish ECR actors, may support some projects, but the 'Made in Europe' component can be problematic for some of the group (Interview 5). In Central and Eastern Europe in particular, the transatlantic dimension of defence cooperation, including the role of American military equipment, could remain politically sensitive.

Moreover, for the PfE and ESN, there are two major obstacles. First, as a matter of principle, radical-right parties in especially the PfE and the ESN are unlikely to support initiatives that deepen EU integration at the expense of an intergovernmental approach.

Second, increased military spending can be highly divisive, especially when it is also aimed at deterring Russia, which some of these parties do not necessarily present as an actor that is threatening to Europe. Additionally, the AfD is an example of internal contradictions even within radical-right parties: while a pro-military attitude rooted in nationalism can often be visible, the party's East German wing can be strongly opposed to measures pointing towards rearmament.

Table 13. EPP national party comparison with another centrist / centre-left party in the European Parliament (defence and security)

Country	EPP national party	Other national party	Overlap ratio (all joint sessions)
Austria	ÖVP	SPÖ	0.73
France	LR	Renaissance	0.66
Germany	CDU	SPD	0.79
Romania	PNL	PSD	0.84
Spain	PP	PSOE	0.77
Sweden	Moderata	SAP	0.75

Source: data provided by Eulytix.

Table 14. EPP national party comparison with another right / radical-right party in the European Parliament (defence and security)

Country	EPP national party	Other national party	Overlap ratio (all joint sessions)
Austria	ÖVP	FPÖ	0.26
France	LR	RN	0.57
Germany	CDU	AfD	0.41
Romania	PNL	AUR	0.57
Spain	PP	Vox	0.53
Sweden	Moderata	SD	0.65

Source: data provided by Eulytix.

The number of processed votes for defence and security is around 243, giving the results some explanatory value. The results suggest that EPP national parties remain more aligned with their centrist or centre-left national counterparts than with parties to their right. In Austria and Germany, this alignment with the centre or centre-left is significantly higher, while in France the usual pattern also holds, albeit by a narrower margin. In Romania, Spain, and Sweden, it should be noted that although alignment between EPP parties and centrist or centre-left parties remains higher than alignment between EPP parties and right- or radical-right parties, the latter is still moderately high in absolute terms. This may allow for selective alignment on specific votes, but it does not suggest that defence and security is likely to become an area of right-wing cooperation. Rather, at first glance, defence and security appears to be another area where the centre majority is still the most relevant.

At most, this result is consistent with the qualitative argument that EPP–ECR alignment may be possible on selected defence projects, but a broader right-wing majority that includes the PfE and ESN remains unlikely and politically unnecessary as long as the centre majority is available. Nevertheless, an important limitation of this data should be highlighted: more than 90% of the votes analysed come from INI procedures. Actual EU-level legislation on defence and security remains relatively new, and many of the most important developments are still at the level of Commission planning or strategic initiatives rather than ordinary legislative procedures. EP groups have thus had few opportunities to vote on high-stakes legislative files in this area, meaning that the current data may not yet provide a fully representative picture.

4.7. Demography

Unlike the previous policy areas, demography is included here as a prospective issue rather than as a field with established voting patterns. This may seem like a surprising addition, since demographic policy is largely a national competence with no strong European legislative dimension. That said, demography is culturally salient, carries considerable symbolic weight, and is often tied by the radical right to migration. The EPP, too, appears to increasingly endorse a viewpoint that ties the issue of migration and demography together (Interviews 2 and 5). As Ivan Krastev argues, hostility to migration in many shrinking communities is closely linked to demographic anxiety. In ageing and depopulating areas, migration is often perceived not only as a policy issue, but also as a symbol of replacement, loss of control, and the possible disappearance of a familiar national or local community. This makes family policy important in national contexts, and one that EPP-related circles also discuss (Krastev, 2017).

According to one interview, it is also a topic that could theoretically draw cross-group support: a paper circulated by the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies

supposedly generated even more interest in ECR circles than in EPP circles (Interview 2). Since data on this policy area does not yet exist, the argument here is necessarily predictive. For this reason, demography is best treated as a forward-looking test of where right-wing policy signalling may emerge next. Based on desk research and interviews, this analysis suggests that, should demographic pressures worsen in Europe, demographic decline could become an issue raised by a right-wing majority in the EP, especially through legally non-binding and thematically flexible resolutions. This would show that right-wing cooperation may emerge not only where legislative competence is strong, but also where symbolic resolutions allow groups to signal shared political priorities.

4.8. SELECTIVE CHANGES, CONTINUED CENTRIST ALIGNMENT

Analysing policy alignment through the available data on the 10th EP term reveals several dynamics. Some EPP parties are highly selective in their alignment with parties to their right. Across most policy areas, alignment with centrist or centre-left parties remains high, while alignment with parties to the EPP's right remains moderate to low.

It is rather the qualitative findings that show exceptions, which arise when policy questions become politically charged – as in migration, deregulation, and agriculture – or when national contexts produce a different voting pattern, as in France. This means that it is only the cases where EPP parties show low alignment with centrist or centre-left parties and high alignment with right or radical-right parties that should be treated as possible signs of stable right-wing alignment. Such cases remain rare. More frequent are cases where alignment is moderate or moderately high on both sides, which could suggest that EPP parties are picking and choosing between a centre and a right-wing majority. However, low EPP–radical-right alignment in technocratic areas such as the single market could also reinforce the broader, structural distinction: EPP parties tend to push policy, while radical-right parties more often push politics. The data does not show the emergence of a stable right-wing policy bloc.

Taking the critique of the EPP into account, the quantitative findings alone do not capture how the *cordon sanitaire* may erode politically. They only show that, structurally, EPP parties and parties to their right often remain quite different. This is important, because this analysis has previously established the view that some EPP MEPs see groups to their right as more closely aligned with them on selected policies. The data does not disprove this claim, since such selected policy areas clearly exist; but it does not fully support it either. It suggests instead that right-wing policy alignment is selective rather than structural. Yet if the *cordon sanitaire* is being eroded despite this limited underlying convergence, then the EPP may be opening the door to more right-wing policy choices without necessarily securing more reliable policy partners. If this interpretation is correct,

some EPP actors may also be operating on an overstated premise: that parties to their right can be more useful policy partners than the centre.

Differences between the EPP and parties to its right are not limited to how they vote – they also concern what each side takes conservatism to mean. The following section turns to that question.

5. COMPATIBLE OR IRRECONCILABLE? COMPETING CONSERVATISMS IN EUROPE

'*Rechts von uns ist nur noch die Wand*' – to our right is only the wall. This paraphrased and often-used quote is attributed to Franz Josef Strauß, one of the leading actors of Christian democracy in the second half of the 20th century. Its meaning reflects two things in particular: first, a political strategy of absorbing or containing right-wing parties in German politics so that the hegemony of the CDU/CSU could not be challenged from the right; and second, a broader political philosophy that the mantle of conservatism in Europe should be carried by Christian Democrats.

The dominance of what the CDU/CSU would call Christian democracy made it one of the central conservative traditions of the post-1945 European order, at least until the rise of the radical right. This did not mean that Christian democracy was the only conservative philosophy. Rather, it meant that the core characteristics of umbrella organisations for conservative parties, such as the EPP, or even broader conservative organisations like the Centrist Democrat International, were, and to a large extent still are, shaped by German Christian Democratic thought: a liberal-democratic, pro-European, and culturally conservative tradition that supports the social market economy model (Interviews 1, 2, and 4).

Nevertheless, it would be a stretch to claim that every EPP party shares a uniform interpretation of what conservatism should be. In fact, divergent conservative traditions in the EPP became increasingly normal after the EPP's 'mergers and acquisitions' phase in the 1990s, when it absorbed many newly risen right-wing parties in Central and Eastern Europe as well as Western Member States, in a pragmatic power-political move to become the strongest group in the EP. This was the period when parties such as Forza Italia and the PP joined the EPP, alongside Central and Eastern European parties like Fidesz. The example of Fidesz, later expelled from the EPP, illustrates how different the political trajectories of parties in an enlarged and diverse EPP could be (Interview 4).

Each Member State's political and cultural traditions, including its conservative thought, are shaped by different histories. The Romanian PNL, for example, has Orthodox conservative traditions, making its version of Christian democracy markedly different from the German one, which reaches back to a tradition of reconciling Catholics and Protestants (Interview 1). Forza Italia, in turn, comes from an Italian political sphere where right-wing thought is uniquely diverse, and where a party such as Meloni's FdI could carry a neo-fascist heritage in a context where 'neo-fascism' has a different meaning than it would in many other Member States (Interview 9). Additionally, the example of Fidesz

illustrates how national-conservative traditions within Central and Eastern European parties could diverge sharply from Western Christian Democratic norms.

Christian Democratic thought should therefore be conceptualised as a unifying, but not defining, political philosophy for EPP parties. Their values are marked by diverging interpretations and possible contradictions. It is telling that when Klaus Welle, one of the more influential EPP actors, discusses Christian democracy, he describes it as a tradition built around 'reconciling the irreconcilable in societies'. While Welle uses this phrase to describe Christian democracy's broader social vocation, it also sheds light on a major question for the future of the *cordon sanitaire*. Important EPP actors may claim that the radical right is ideologically incompatible with their parties. Yet the rise of the radical right, and its interpretation of conservatism, presents a major challenge to Christian Democrats: it offers a different and competing answer to what conservatism should mean. This interpretation can also be politically unifying, as seen in the case of the Patriots for Europe, even if it does not define all radical-right parties in the same way.

Having established how diverse conservative parties within the EPP can be, this section examines whether the EPP's claim of incompatibility is substantive. If the future of the *cordon sanitaire* also depends on ideological compatibility, then it is a key question whether Christian Democratic and radical-right conservatism can be reconciled, or whether their underlying assumptions remain irreconcilable.

5.1. Two axes of incompatibility: Europe and liberal democracy

To better understand how some on the radical right imagine conservatism, one useful analogy is this: if Christian Democrats seek to conserve the post-1945 order, radical-right parties often seek to conserve elements of the post-1920 order (Interview 5). This can directly contradict the values and conservatism of the EPP's Christian democracy, because it draws on elements such as nationalism, absolute sovereignty, cultural homogeneity, and majoritarianism.

Based on interviews and desk research, the claim of this analysis is that there are two main axes on which Christian Democratic conservatism and radical-right conservatism appear to clash most directly. This incompatibility is not distributed evenly across the groups to the EPP's right: it is most pronounced among PfE and ESN actors, while the ECR contains both 'more compatible and more problematic strands' (Interviews 9 and 11).

The first major axis of incompatibility concerns the European Union itself. The most striking illustration of just how differently Christian Democrats and the radical right perceive the EU is their distinct political vocabulary. For example, if one reads EPP-aligned texts and, say, PfE-aligned texts side by side, it will quickly become clear that the answer to institutional overreach for Christian Democrats is 'subsidiarity', whereas for the radical

right it is 'sovereignty', with the latter often understood as absolute. The difference between these two framings should not be understated. For Christian Democrats, the concept of a supranational EU, the sharing of sovereignty, or the balancing of Member States with other institutions is not seen as incompatible with their conservatism. The EU for them can be depicted as an old conservative dream where states can be united by a common civilisation and shared cultural foundations. As Federico Ottavio Reho from the Martens Centre argues, 'defending European unity today … is not a betrayal of conservatism – but its fulfilment'. Deeper EU integration is therefore not inherently problematic for Christian Democrats, provided it remains compatible with subsidiarity and proportionality (Interview 2).

By contrast, radical-right conservatism tends to root its understanding of conservatism more directly in nationalism and the primacy of the nation state. In this view, sovereignty is often treated as absolute, non-negotiable, and belonging primarily to the Member States. The legitimacy of the EU can therefore only rest on an intergovernmental approach, with Member States as the primary decision-makers above the European Parliament and even the Commission (Interviews 7, 8 and 9). Europe, for them, must be a 'Europe of Nations' – and stay far away from any path that leads to federalism. Since the radical right inherently sees today's EU taking incremental steps towards that goal, it sees the EPP's approach as unconservative (of the nation state), deeply wrong, and preferably reversible (Interviews 4, 6, 7 and 9). Interestingly, radical-right conservatives may also believe in common aspects of European civilisation. However, it can often be viewed primarily through the lens of a radical-right understanding of civilisation – nation, tribe, family.

Second, whereas both groups base their conservatism on democracy, they may give contradictory answers to the question of what kind of democracy they defend (Interview 11). The main axis of incompatibility may lie in inclusivity versus exclusivity. In a very simplified understanding, this axis captures the divide between liberal democracy and the model Orbán provocatively termed 'illiberal democracy'. Liberal democracy is inclusive in the sense that the political community is not solely defined by the cultural or national majority, but by equal citizenship, equal rights, and the protection of political minorities even when they lose political influence. By contrast, in democracies with what one could call 'illiberal elements', the political community is often understood primarily as the nation. Its protection can justify forms of exclusion that directly or indirectly discriminate against those seen as not fully belonging to it; and where society is imagined as homogeneous, a highly majoritarian logic can apply (Krastev, 2017; Krastev & Holmes, 2019).

One underlying difference is again nationhood and nationalism – the latter being a defining feature of Orbán's 'illiberal' thought. Christian Democrats do not inherently

require conservatism to be tied to nationalism (Interview 2). Indeed, mixing nationalism with conservatism, or abandoning secular democratic values, is often regarded as a harmful mistake made by Catholic-conservative parties in the post-1920 period. For some on the radical right, by contrast, conservatism and democracy are often rooted in nationhood, making the removal of this link unacceptable (Krastev & Holmes, 2019). Because sovereignty and democracy are tied to a more exclusive political community, liberal-democratic constraints can appear as obstacles to the full expression of the people's will rather than as necessary safeguards of democracy itself (Interview 11). For Christian Democrats, democracy cannot be reduced to majority rule alone; it also depends on constitutional limits, minority rights, and checks and balances that support this logic (Krastev, 2017; Interview 3).

These two axes of incompatibility do indeed suggest significant contradictions between how Christian Democrats and some on the radical right understand conservatism. On Europe, radical-right positions are often considered unacceptable by Christian Democrats because current EPP-backed reform plans – such as the extension of qualified majority voting, defence integration, and stronger EU-level coordination – move in a more supranational direction. A radical-right insistence on absolute sovereignty and intergovernmentalism would therefore not merely slow these plans down, but put an almost complete halt to today's trajectory of EU integration. Sidelining the European Parliament and the Commission would also undermine existing institutional arrangements and challenge the authority of EU law and the Court of Justice of the EU.

The question of inclusivity versus exclusivity, by contrast, concerns values and starting assumptions. What should be accepted, what should be defended, and who fully belongs to the political community are philosophical and moral questions that fall beyond the scope of this analysis. What can be claimed, however, is that there is a real difference between Christian Democrats and some radical-right actors on this axis as well.

5.2. THE NON-BINARY REALITY OF CONSERVATIVE POLITICS

Leaving the realm of ideological theory, it should be no surprise that reality presents less binary interpretations of conservatism across Europe. Having established how varied these interpretations can be, the next question is whether there is middle ground between Christian Democratic and radical-right conservatism. The short answer is that there seems to be.

Meloni's FdI is used repeatedly in this analysis for good reason. In this section, FdI matters because it appears to be both pro-European and nationalist, with Meloni describing it as the most nationalistic party in Italy (Interview 9). One interpretation of her conservatism is that it treats the nation as the primary component of culture, but not as the only

possible safeguard of sovereignty. On the basis of being 'constructive', this combination currently appears sufficient to warrant partnership from the EPP (Interview 3). However, national context also matters. Meloni's coalition partner Lega, which sits with the PfE, is considered part of the radical right, yet its traditional political background is secessionist rather than nationalist. PiS provided an example of internal complexity: some members of the party may have acted as pragmatic partners on selected European policy files, while the party as a whole has also been associated with illiberal behaviour – so much so that the party recently split exactly along these lines. These examples show that even within the radical right, conservatism does not always take the same form (Interviews 9, 10, and 11).

Moreover, the entire concept of illiberalism may be problematic for some radical-right actors. For example, the political traditions of the Dutch could make politicians in the Partij voor de Vrijheid sceptical towards it (Interview 8). Parties are not ideologically static either; much depends on leadership and political context. The Austrian FPÖ has previously entered into two federal coalitions with the ÖVP, presenting a more moderate face in both cases. Under Herbert Kickl, however, the party has consciously radicalised, becoming both more Eurosceptic and more openly illiberal (Interviews 8 and 10).

The Austrian case is analytically important for two reasons. First, it shows that the positions of radical-right parties can change quickly depending on leadership (Interview 10). Second, it illustrates a strategy that some EPP parties have already tried: 'Romanising the barbarians', or attempting to reduce the radicality of radical-right parties by bringing them into government. This strategy is controversial not only because it weakens the *cordon sanitaire*, but also because it has rarely worked out well (Interview 1). One reason is rooted in a difference discussed throughout this analysis: whereas EPP parties often seek to demonstrate competence through policy, radical-right parties frequently treat politics itself – identity, conflict, and cultural power – as the main arena of struggle (Krastev & Holmes, 2019). Because of these underlying incompatibilities, trying to moderate radical-right parties through government participation remains a fragile and uncertain strategy.

5.3. WAITING FOR A 'CONSTRUCTIVE RIGHT' OR EMPOWERING THE RADICALS?

Why does the radical right often prefer to push politics instead of policy, even after moving from protest politics into established party competition (Interview 10)? One answer may lie in an ideological anchor used by several radical-right actors, including Orbán: Antonio Gramsci, and specifically the idea of cultural hegemony (Krastev & Holmes, 2019). This matters for conservatism because, in the view of prominent radical-right ideologues, the present is not a normal period of politics but an interregnum: the old liberal order is weakening, while a new order has not yet been born. During such a period, the goal is not

merely to offer better policy within the existing framework, but to contest the framework itself. This helps explain why radical-right actors often prioritise politics over policy. They seek to define the crisis, reshape cultural common sense, and build a new majority before detailed policy compromises become the central question.

The 'time of monsters' concept is difficult to reconcile with Christian Democratic politics, precisely because Christian Democrats generally seek to preserve and reform the post-1945 order rather than tear it down. This is where the term 'constructive right' becomes important. For EPP parties, the constructive right is one whose instinct is to improve the existing order, not replace it entirely (Interview 3)[4]. This might define a deeper divide between Christian Democratic and radical-right conservatism: one side seeks correction within the system, while the other often treats the system itself as the object of contestation. Christian Democrats are therefore unlikely to see 'destructive' radical-right parties as partners as long as the post-1945 order remains their point of reference. This could only theoretically change if the order itself changes, or if Christian Democrats come to believe that preserving it requires a different strategy.

Yet the trajectory of conservative discourse may not unfold exactly as Christian Democrats imagine. For some on the radical right, victory does not necessarily require immediate electoral or governmental success. It can also mean building a broader cultural, social, and discursive ecosystem that becomes increasingly difficult to exclude from normal political life – a logic rooted in a Gramscian understanding of cultural hegemony. In this interpretation, radical-right ideologues such as Götz Kubitschek suggest that the real battlefield has already shifted: "Wir werden auf dem Weg dorthin Auseinandersetzungen zwischen rechten Fundis und rechten Realos erleben, aber rechts werden sie alle sein" – 'We will witness clashes between right-wing fundamentalists and right-wing pragmatists along the way, but they will all be right-wing.' If Kubitschek is correct, then when EPP parties give ground to radical-right positions, they may be playing into the hands of the very actors they seek to contain (Interview 12).

This critique should be kept in mind even if it also points to the EPP's own 'catch-22': remain centre-aligned and risk watching more dissatisfied voters migrate to the radical right; or try to win on the radical right's terrain, but risk ensuring that the debate increasingly takes place on terrain already shaped by it.

[4] In practice, this could take the form of ground rules for cooperation, such as Weber's 'pro-EU, pro-Ukraine, and pro-rule of law' requirements. If radical-right parties accept these conditions, they can present themselves as non-destructive actors operating within the existing order.

5.4. SYNTHESIS OR ZERO-SUM COMPETITION?

Comparisons between EPP parties and parties to their right suggest that, although the EPP has unilaterally reformulated the *cordon sanitaire*, a right-wing majority remains situational, selective, and not truly the EPP's primary preference. Indeed, the comparison between Christian Democratic and radical-right conservatism may suggest that their competition is ultimately close to a zero-sum game: their political visions are not easily compatible, and in some respects may be irreconcilable (Interview 1).

At the same time, this analysis has also shown that national contexts can shape political strategies, policy alignments, and even ideological boundaries; and more importantly, that group-level behaviour may erode the *cordon* in ways that simple data analysis or ideological incompatibility may not predetermine. Incremental changes matter not only in parliamentary behaviour and policy positioning, but also in political philosophy – and if a synthesis is possible, the Meloni case points to one possible version of it.

The future trajectory of conservatism cannot be predicted with confidence; therefore, this section should only be read as a theoretical extrapolation. That said, the changing international order, increasingly acknowledged by many Western leaders, cannot be ignored – especially for a branch of conservatism that still clings to the post-1945 settlement. These changes may allow for a synthesis that currently appears unlikely, but is not conceptually impossible. A shifting international order may push some on the radical right to accept the EU not as an ideological project, but as a geopolitical necessity. Simultaneously, the erosion of identities and the growing salience of protecting one's political community may push Christian Democrats to take a firmer stance on culture, perhaps even at the EU level. One interview touched on this question, with an EPP-affiliated actor arguing that there may be grounds for moving beyond the language of the 'European way of life' towards that of 'European civilisation'. This is a question the EPP may already know it has to address (Interview 2).

A synthesis is possible only if both sides move: the radical right would have to accept some form of European capacity, while Christian Democrats would have to become more culturally assertive. Such a synthesis would change both radical-right conservatism and Christian democracy itself, creating a political formation that would move beyond the current question of the *cordon sanitaire* – and thus the scope of this paper (Interview 4).

6. Conclusion: the *cordon sanitaire* in a new equilibrium

The starting point of this analysis has been that the 2024 EP elections created a new parliamentary arithmetic in which a right-wing majority became numerically possible, made up of four groups: the EPP, ECR, PfE, and ESN. This challenged stringent interpretations of the *cordon sanitaire* after votes such as the 'Situation in Venezuela' resolution.

In this new political context, the EPP has unilaterally reformulated the *cordon sanitaire* away from the stricter understanding that had previously prevailed. The EPP still claims to reject working together with the radical right and says that it continues to prefer the centre majority. Yet it appears to be open to accepting votes from parties to its right so that a right-wing majority can be considered possible.

This analysis has set out to assess the EPP's claims from three angles: strategic incentives, policy alignment, and ideological compatibility. Section 3 showed that the EPP's changed behaviour has not produced a collapse of the *cordon sanitaire*, but a shift towards selective, informal coordination. All four groups have incentives to do this: the EPP can preserve agenda control, the ECR can mediate, and the PfE or ESN can gain legitimacy without formal involvement. Furthermore, for some in the EPP the *cordon* now runs through the ECR rather than between two clearly separated blocs.

The section further showed that the reformulation of the *cordon* serves a tactical purpose for the EPP. By keeping a right-wing majority available, the EPP gains leverage to push the S&D, Renew, and the Greens to accept policy outcomes closer to its own preferences. This tactical logic also reflects a deeper strategic difference. The EPP uses right-wing majorities to preserve agenda control and win policy battles, while the PfE and ESN can use the same opportunities to normalise their presence, politicise the agenda, and weaken the *cordon sanitaire* without formal cooperation. Whether the EPP's changed behaviour is driven by a loss of dissatisfied voters to the radical right, or by an active tactical choice to preserve agenda control and keep winning, the result is similar: the *cordon sanitaire* is being eroded towards something more permissive.

Section 4 showed that this reformulation is not underpinned by a corresponding alignment in policy. Across most areas, EPP parties remain closer to their centrist and centre-left national counterparts than to parties on their right. Clear cases of right-wing alignment remain rare – with France the most evident instance where national voting patterns help to increase right-wing alignment. More frequent are cases where alignment is moderate on both sides, which suggests that EPP parties can move between a centre and a right-wing majority rather than being inherently closer to either.

Differences with the radical right are widest in technocratic areas such as the single market and in sensitive areas such as foreign policy. Even in the most politicised areas – migration, agriculture and the CAP, and parts of Green Deal deregulation – right-wing majorities appear to remain selective rather than routine. The data therefore reflects one of the EPP's own stated reasons for coordination: selected areas of closer alignment to its right do exist, but they do not represent a general trend. The erosion of the *cordon sanitaire* is not matched by the policy alignment that would make a right-wing bloc durable.

Section 5 showed that the ideological ground for such a bloc is also currently limited. Christian Democratic and radical-right conservatism clash most clearly on two axes. One is the EU, where Christian Democrats accept supranational integration if bounded by subsidiarity and proportionality, while much of the radical right prioritises sovereignty and intergovernmentalism. The other is liberal democracy, where Christian Democrats defend inclusive, liberal governance, while some on the radical right root democracy in a more exclusive national community and majoritarian logic.

At the same time, Section 5 showed that this divide is not fully binary: actors such as Meloni's FdI suggest that a 'constructive right' can become acceptable to the EPP when it works within the existing order rather than trying to replace it. The deeper conflict is not just about policy, but about whether conservatism means correcting the post-1945 order or contesting it altogether. Beyond this, the section identified a further cost that the EPP's strategy may carry on its own terms: if some on the radical right measure success by shifting the terrain of debate rather than by holding office, then giving ground on their issues may serve them even if the EPP retains its agenda setting power.

Altogether, the findings of this analysis suggest that, measured against the interpretation that the EPP now applies, the *cordon sanitaire* appears formally secure; measured against the one it previously accepted, it has been moved. It has now been repositioned in a new equilibrium in which selective right-wing alignment and majorities are possible, but formal cooperation is still not.

However, by knowingly moving away from the *cordon*'s previously accepted interpretation, the EPP has opened the door to its selective erosion and potential loss of meaning. The latter refers to the criticism that the *cordon sanitaire* is not only about excluding the radical right from formal cooperation, but also about limiting radical-right influence over political discourse. In this sense, critics of the EPP would argue that its reformulation may defeat one of the *cordon sanitaire's* core purposes. Nevertheless, '*a cordon sanitaire'* still stands. Its future and meaning will depend on whether national political dynamics, policy conflicts, and the unresolved contest over conservatism in Europe gradually push the two conservative sides closer together or further apart.

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ANNEX I. LIST OF INTERVIEWED PERSONS

Interview Number	Affiliation
Interview 1	EPP-affiliated person
Interview 2	EPP-affiliated person
Interview 3	EPP-affiliated person
Interview 4	EPP-affiliated person
Interview 5	ECR-affiliated person
Interview 6	ECR-affiliated person
Interview 7	PfE-affiliated person
Interview 8	PfE-affiliated person
Interview 9	Italian think-tanker
Interview 10	Austrian think-tanker
Interview 11	Polish think-tanker
Interview 12	German think-tanker
Interview 13	Greens-affiliated person
Interview 14	The Left-affiliated person

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