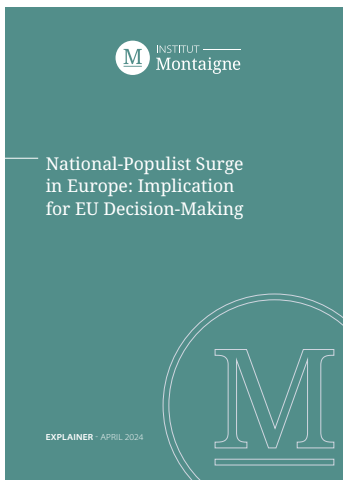


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National-Populist Surge in Europe: Implication for EU Decision-Making



The rise of national-populist and far-right parties in Europe at both the national and European levels poses a significant challenge for the EU's future. As the European Parliament elections draw near, polls indicate that these parties are set to **make a significant breakthrough** – in addition to the seats currently held by Fidesz, Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán's party, they are expected to win an additional 30 new seats, including 22 for the Identity and Democracy (ID) group and 8 for the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR). But is the media right to argue that a **"populist wave is sweeping over Europe"**? And if so, what implications will these parties have on European policy-making?

A growing capacity to set the terms of the EU debate

National-populist and far-right parties have held seats in the European Parliament since the 1980s, but it is only recently that they have been able to set the terms of the European debate. Two key factors explain this. First, they have changed their **narrative on the European Union**: Rather than exiting the EU, these parties are now advocating to change it from the inside by creating a new "European Alliance of Nations". Their strategy appears

to be working: more and more Europeans are turning out to vote for them. Second, many voters tend to look at **the European election primarily through a domestic lens** – that is, their votes are used to express their approval of or dissatisfaction with their national government, rather than vote on the EU itself. In many member states, national-populist parties are emerging as the only credible opposition party, while in countries such as Hungary and Italy, they are even leading the government.

National-populist parties' struggle to influence the EU agenda

Although they have secured more seats with every European election, national-populist and far-right parties are still struggling to live up to their commitment to “transform the EU from the inside.” Having a significant number of seats does not always translate into significant influence. To change the EU, and exert influence over its policy-making, three conditions need to be met:

- 1. The ability of a political group to put forward policy proposals and guarantee strong unity within the group** by limiting internal divisions. This is a crucial requirement for wielding influence in committee and plenary votes. However, looking back at the last five years, it is clear that the parties that make up the ID and ECR groups, as well as non attached members such as Orbán's Fidesz, are riven by differences. Internal divides over **the war in Ukraine, relations with Russia and NATO, and the handling of migratory flows exist in both ID and ECR – and between them.**
- 2. The ability of a political party or group to collaborate effectively with other groups in the European Parliament to build support for a policy and reach compromises.** In a parliament made up of 720 MEPs, no group alone is numerically sufficient to pass a proposal. Instead, groups must learn to work together to build majorities. Even if polls are right, ECR and ID are unlikely to get more than 169 seats – which is not enough to form an outright majority. The only way they can wield any influence is by working with other groups, such as centre-right European People's Party (EPP). That presupposes that the EPP is also willing to work with them. The previous term demonstrated that this has only ever happened when these groups voted to oppose a proposal put forward by the European Commission. It was never in favor of an amendment or a new proposal.

- 3. Beyond the European Parliament, it is also necessary to have friends and allies within the Council of the EU,** the grouping of the 27 EU governments, and the European Commission – both of which are also involved in shaping the EU's trajectory for the next five years.

In the last European Parliament (2019-2024), ID and ECR have failed on all three conditions. The jury is still out on whether they will do better over the next five years. It is our view that while the numerical strength of these groups poses a challenge, their actual ability to exert influence remains limited. **A centrist coalition with a variable composition – comprising the S&D (center-left group) Renew and the EPP – is still the most likely majority in the next European Parliament – possibly backed up by the Greens. The EPP could try to form a coalition with the ECR but until now, it has categorically refused to work with ID.**

National-populist and far-right parties have been unable to push forward their own legislative proposals – **mostly due to the huge internal differences within the group**, but also because of their weak ties to the other European institutions. Without a strategic and programmatic consensus, and a more robust presence in the Council of the European Union, their influence will remain constrained. For now, **an “international coalition of nationalist-populist parties” appears to be unrealistic.**

Nevertheless, their capacity to dominate the European debate – particularly on immigration or to push back on the EU's climate policies – should not be underestimated. What's more, a good result at the June 2024 vote, could enhance their influence and credibility at the national level. This would give them greater air time, influence and legitimacy at home. In the long term, we could see more nationalist-populist governments and, therefore, greater nationalist-populist representation in the Council. Strengthened presence in both the European Parliament and the Council of the EU would give them greater responsibility and influence at the European level to either change it, block it or simply slow it down.