COUNTERING THE FAR RIGHT IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

EXPLORING PROGRESSIVE STRATEGIES IN THE AGE OF FAR-RIGHT NORMALISATION

ABSTRACT

This policy brief examines the growing normalisation of the far right in the 2024-2029 European Parliament (EP) and offers a set of practical recommendations to guide progressive strategies in this evolving landscape. Part 1 defines the far right and maps its influence through three threat scenarios: full alignment between the European People's Party (EPP) and all far-right groups; EPP cooperation with the European Conservatives and Reformists but not with other far-right groups; and cooperation between far-right groups without EPP involvement. Part 2 assesses strategic responses, drawing on national case studies and findings from the academic literature.

In Part 2, the policy brief proposes three sets of recommendations for progressive actors.

- First, maintain the remaining elements of the *cordon sanitaire* while developing complementary approaches to address the normalisation of radical-right positions and limit their symbolic influence.

- Second, strengthen cooperation among democratic, pro-European forces by building issue-based coalitions, enhancing coordination between national parties and their EP delegations, and further splitting the far right on divisive issues.

- Third, reject far-right narratives on migration and instead prioritise positive, solution-oriented messaging on social and economic issues that offer credible, policy-specific alternatives capable of resonating with voters.
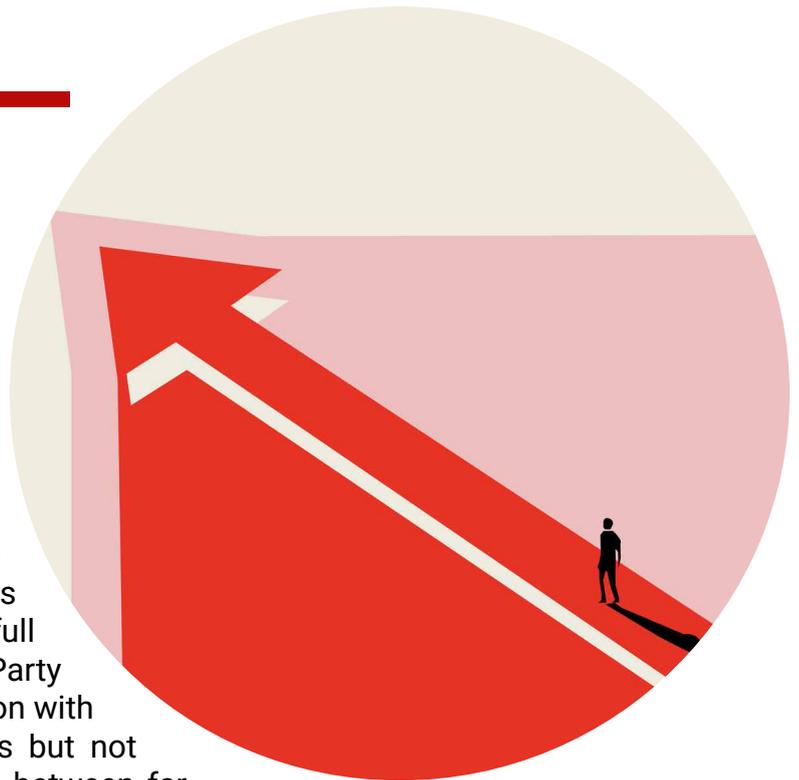
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Introduction

Since the mid-2010s, far-right parties, that is, parties espousing nationalism and authoritarianism,[1] have experienced a marked increase in their electoral performance across Europe. This trend has manifested not only at the domestic level but also within the European Parliament (EP), where such parties have secured a growing share of seats and achieved greater visibility. The rise of the far right constitutes an urgent challenge to democratic governance, social rights and the future of European integration. Far-right entrenchment has resulted in a nationalist contestation of liberal democratic institutions and the further politicisation of issues such as migration, identity and sovereignty.

The far-right influence now extends into both the executive and legislative branches of government. At the executive level, far-right parties are in government in several European Union (EU) member states, granting them the capacity to introduce and implement policies. In some instances, this has involved constitutional reforms that undermine liberal democratic institutions. Moreover, their presence within the European Council provides them with a voice in the EU's executive decision-making processes, making it increasingly difficult to impose a *cordon sanitaire*, that is, a traditional strategy aimed at excluding extremist actors from political power.[2]

At the legislative level, far-right parties wield significant influence through their parliamentary representation, often acting as key power brokers or "kingmakers" in both national parliaments and the EP. In the latest EP elections held in June 2024, far-right-party success intensified, further emboldening these parties and reinforcing their ability to operate as legitimate actors within the European political arena. In the new EP legislative term, far-right parties have consolidated their presence with the formation of three political groups to the right of the European People's Party (EPP) and are increasingly positioning themselves as influential players in EU policy making. What distinguishes this EP term from previous ones is not merely the scale of their representation but also a qualitative shift in their political strategy. Rather than pursuing hard-Eurosceptic EU exit, most of these parties increasingly seek to change Europe from within its own structures. They have begun to engage more strategically in parliamentary processes to forge transnational alliances, work closely with EPP and systematically attempt to reshape the policy agenda within EU institutions. As a result, policy making is becoming more confrontational and less consensus driven. Growing fragmentation and the erosion of traditional grand-coalition majorities make building issue-based alliances more difficult, complicating negotiations and increasing procedural friction.[3] This enables the far right to block or oppose legislation related to democracy, human rights and the rule of law, further eroding the normative foundations of European democracy. This signals a transition toward an assertive, institutionalised far-right presence that directly challenges the liberal democratic foundations of the European project.

For progressives, formulating effective responses to these developments represents an important and complex challenge. The fact that the far right now enjoys greater legitimacy within domestic parliaments, has access to more substantial financial and organisational resources, and increasingly projects a "mainstream" image means that these parties are now normalised in the European arena. Due to the far right's large vote share and the gradual normalisation of its political agenda, it has become far more difficult to isolate these actors institutionally. Against this backdrop, a key question arises: how may we develop a framework for effective progressive strategies to address this democratic challenge in the EP and beyond?

This policy brief provides a structured analysis and a set of practical recommendations to inform progressive approaches. It is primarily targeted towards progressives in the EP. In addition, it could be informative for progressives in other European institutions and a broader progressive audience wanting to understand strategies of dealing with a mainstreamed far right in parliamentary settings. Part 1 defines the far right and maps its influence in the EP (2024-2029), comparing it to previous EP terms. Part 2 outlines strategic responses

supported by national case studies,[4] highlighting regional variation, contextual challenges and key findings from the broader literature. The policy brief concludes with a set of actionable recommendations for progressives.

Part I – mapping far-right influence in the EP (2024-2029)

How may we define the far right?

We begin by defining what is meant by the "far right". Establishing a precise definition is not a theoretical exercise. It has direct and significant implications for designing targeted, effective policy responses. In this policy brief, we employ the umbrella term "far right" to describe parties that all adopt nationalism, authoritarianism and – in some instances – populism in their ideologies and programmatic agendas.[5] The far-right umbrella includes parties and groups that all use nationalism, that is, an ideology that emphasises the prioritisation of the in-group, to justify all their policy positions on socioeconomic issues.[6]

The normalisation of these parties has resulted in a tension related to the definition and practical implications of the use of the term "far right". One criticism of the use of the term is that these parties cannot be simultaneously normalised and sit on the far end of the political spectrum. The distinction between extreme-right and radical right variants is useful here and can help resolve this tension.[7] The former refers to political parties that are often openly racist, have clear ties to fascism, and employ violence and aggressive tactics. These groups may operate outside or within the realm of electoral politics or both. The latter, namely, the radical right, has distanced itself from fascism and opposes the far-right label. Radical right actors tend to accept procedural democracy, that is, they have a minimal electoral understanding of democracy, while contesting its liberal components, such as minority rights and the rule of law, which constitute fundamental principles of EU democracy.[8] This variant tends to be the most widespread and electorally successful in Europe. While radical right parties

more often cooperate with mainstream actors, they still belong to the far-right umbrella category. This classification is not based on normative criteria nor on the parties' alignment with specific EP groups. Rather, it is based on clear, identifiable criteria related to their nationalist and authoritarian ideological characteristics, categorised by academic research and party classification tools, such as the PopuList.[9]

The use of the terminology "far right" is therefore important because it allows practitioners to accurately identify these parties. At the same time, the use of terminology such as Nazism or fascism is best avoided because, as shown above, the majority of far-right parties that are successful in the European context are the radical right and not the extreme-right variants. As a result, this terminology is not convincing to the majority of their voters.

It is important to note that parties may shift between the two variants over time. Examples include parties such as the French Rassemblement National and the Sweden Democrats, which have become less extreme over time, moderating their discourse and agendas.[10] This discursive moderation often entails a shift from ascriptive nationalist claims to more civic ones, for example, claiming to exclude not on the basis of race or genealogy but rather on the basis of espousing liberal democratic values.[11] Many parties justify their Islamophobic positions in this way, claiming that Islam is an enemy of liberal democracy and antithetical to western values. However, some far-right parties tend to oscillate between radical and extreme positions. For example, the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) has gained ground through continuous radicalisation. While the party commenced as an anti-EU, single-issue party that employed civic nationalist narratives, it has become progressively more extreme.[12]

The far right in the EP (2024-2029)

The existence of different far-right variants is reflected in the composition of the EP, which currently consists of three groups, namely, the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), the Patriots for Europe (PfE) and the Europe of

Sovereign Nations (ESN), as well as non-affiliated MEPs. First, founded in 2009, the ECR is the oldest of the three groups. It is also the most moderate of the three. The group describes itself as a centre-right political group founded to take the EU in a new direction, which they term "Euro-realism", that is, a vision that respects "the sovereignty of nations, and focuses on economic recovery, growth and competitiveness".[13] The group has 78 MEPs, which translates to 10.83% of EP seats. Parties in this group include the Brothers of Italy, the Sweden Democrats and the Finns Party. Second, the PfE is a new political group established in June 2024. The group describes itself as a "patriotic movement", which stands "firmly for national sovereignty, secure borders, economic stability, and the protection of free speech" and advocates "strict measures against illegal immigration to preserve cultural identity".[14] This group has 84 MEPs, translating to 11.67% of EP seats. Parties in this group include the Hungarian Fidesz, the French National Rally, the Italian League, the Spanish Vox and the Portuguese Chega.

The third political group, ESN, centres its agenda on the "idea of a Europe of homelands: a European community of sovereign, democratic nation states". They describe themselves as rooted in the "Greco-Roman as well as biblical traditions" and committed to "the preservation of our European cultures and their native identities".[15] They oppose the "implementation of LGBTQ and diversity agendas" and promote traditional family values.[16] The group has 25 MEPs, which translates to 3.47% of the seats. Parties in this group include the AfD, the French Reconquest, the Bulgarian Revival and the Polish Confederation. Both PfE and ESN adopt more hardline stances than the ECR on a range of social issues as well as their Eurosceptic positions. Finally, some MEPs from national far-right parties, for example, the Greek Nikki and the Polish Confederation, are among the current parliament's 30 non-attached members. (For a full list of each group's composition and EP electoral results, see Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 Table 2).

The far right has also expanded its influence in the new EP term through institutional channels. For example, ECR MEPs chair three EP committees,

namely, budgets, agriculture and petitions; hold 10 vice-presidencies across other committees; and two EP vice-presidencies. This marks an increase from the previous EP term, during which ECR chaired one committee (budgets) and had one vice-president, and it has implications with regards to agenda-setting powers.[17] It should be noted that PfE and ESN do not hold similar positions.

Voting patterns

In principle, the three far-right groups (ECR, PfE, ESN) have a unified stance on cultural issues, including immigration. However, this does not always translate into unified legislative action in the EP. We observe significant variation in the ways in which they vote in the EP. This often echoes the tension between the extreme and radical variants discussed above and how these parties want to portray themselves in domestic and European politics. ECR tends to vote more closely to EPP, while ESN is the least consensus-driven in its voting patterns and PfE tends to be positioned somewhere in the middle.[18] This is a continuation from the previous EP term when ECR voted together with EPP in more than 70% of the (final) votes. There was much less alignment between ECR and Identity and Democracy (ID) and between EPP and ID.[19] The three groups rarely vote together. ECR and PfE have voted together with EPP on 2.5% of EP votes, as of 18 September 2025, compared to an overall 3.3% in the previous legislative term (EPP, ECR, ID).[20]

The main strategic issue in the current EP, however, is that the right-wing block has increased its size and, therefore, its potential legislative significance (see Figure 1). This has opened a new political space for ECR and EPP to further collaborate, contributing to the erosion of the previously existing cordon sanitaire. This constitutes a novel challenge for the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats group (S&D) and its legislative work. EPP's collaboration endeavours with the far right on selected issues coupled with the increased size of the right-wing block constitute one of the key structural changes characterising the current EP and are central to understanding the broader power shifts

Figure 1. EP seat allocation, 2024-2029

European Parliament 2024-2029
Seat allocation by political group /stacked by spectrum)
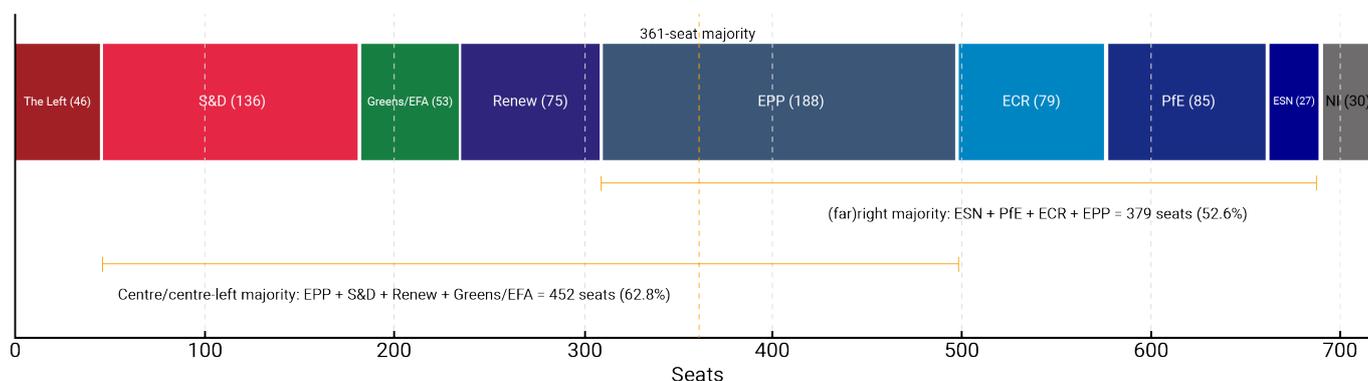
Source: based on European Parliament data[22]

that have taken place.[21] This development highlights the need to focus on the conjunction between far-right behaviour and mainstream accommodation.

In what follows, we examine a few votes on illustrative cases that have taken place during the 2024-2029 EP term.[23] We highlight three collaboration scenarios within the right-wing block with varying significance for progressives. Given that the new EP is just over a year old, our conclusions are based on a small pool of votes and are not representative of the entire EP term.

Collaboration scenario 1: Full alignment between EPP and all far-right groups

This scenario represents maximal collaboration where the EPP joins forces with the ECR and other far-right EP groups.

• **Deregulation and right-wing socio-economic policy**: this refers specifically to the November 2025 vote on the Omnibus Simplification Directive when EPP joined forces with the far-right ECR and PfE to remove companies' obligation to develop

climate transition plans.[24] This demonstrates the EPP's strategy to use far-right support to advance a deregulatory agenda.

• **NGO legislation**: this refers to the non-governmental organisation (NGO) funding scrutiny working group created by a collaboration between EPP, ECR and PfE to monitor NGO funding, rejecting broader oversight of companies, lobbyists and governments.[25] Another example includes the proposed defunding of environmental NGOs (LIFE programme) whereby centre-right and far-right MEPs pushed to freeze €15.6 million in EU LIFE programme funds, cutting up to 70% of operating grants for environmental NGOs.[26] These initiatives constitute examples of legislations passed to shrink civic space.

This scenario is less common under current political dynamics, but its impact can be highly significant when it occurs. There are already several examples where such cooperation has taken place. Full alignment would represent a major shift in parliamentary coalitions, with substantial implications for EU governance, democratic norms and policy direction.

Collaboration scenario 2: EPP cooperation with ECR but not with other far-right groups

This scenario represents a collaboration between EPP and ECR. Examining this scenario highlights that certain EP votes have become wedge issues dividing the three far-right groups in the current EP term. The most important dividing lines thus far are their positions on Russia/Ukraine and on economic and welfare policies.

- **Ukraine**: For the EP vote (9 September 2025) to reassert "unwavering commitment to Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity"; to mandate the "European Commission to open negotiation clusters to advance the country's EU membership bid"; and to reaffirm the EU and its member states' intention to "remain Ukraine's strategic allies", ECR voted primarily in favour and in alignment with EPP. On the other hand, PfE and ESN voted overwhelmingly against.

- **European Social Fund**: The EP vote on the European Social Fund (10 September 2025) to ratify specific measures to address strategic challenges, including channelling funding to new priorities such as defence industrial capacity, military mobility, affordable housing and water resilience. Similarly, ECR aligned with EPP and was largely in favour, whereas PfE was divided and ESN voted overwhelmingly against (see Appendix 2).

This scenario reflects a gradual normalisation of far-right positions within mainstream decision-making. The risk here is one of "infiltration", where boundaries between traditional centre-right actors and far-right factions become blurred. Such cooperation has been more common so far and could reshape legislative agendas incrementally, influencing policies on migration, the rule of law and institutional reform.

Collaboration scenario 3: Cooperation between far-right groups without EPP involvement

This scenario represents collaboration between the three far-right EP groups without EPP. This type of collaboration tends to occur on issues related to democracy, the rule of law and human rights.

- **Rule of law**: The EP vote on the Commission's 2024 Rule of Law report (18 June 2025) on "persistent, systemic and new threats to the rule of law across the EU" and the ratification of enforcement tools. The ECR, PfE and ESN were fully aligned against the Rule of Law report and voted in opposition to the EPP, which voted largely in favour of the vote.

- **Women's rights**: The EP vote on the status of women (19 December 2024), which called for resisting efforts to roll back existing rights and pressures from anti-rights movements, combatting the feminisation of poverty and sought healthcare provision, including safe and legal abortions, to be available for everyone. The ECR, PfE and ESN voted overwhelmingly against and in opposition to the EPP, which was split (see Appendix 2).

This type of collaboration is in line with analyses of the ECR's voting behaviour in the previous EP term, which found that the "ECR group has played an active and often cooperative role in the politics of the EP, albeit not in the policy areas where its national conservative and soft Eurosceptic ideology comes to prominence, such as women's rights or institutional affairs".[27]

Although less common, this scenario has occurred in notable cases, particularly on cultural and democracy-related issues. Coordinated far-right action can still exert meaningful pressure on debates and outcomes, even without EPP backing, by shifting the political narrative, obstructing consensus or pulling policy discussions toward more radical positions.

Three collaboration scenarios within the right-wing block (EP 2024-2029)

Scenario 1. Full alignment between EPP and all far-right groups

- **Frequency:** low
- **Impacted areas:** EU governance, democratic norms, policy direction
- **Implication:** shift in parliamentary coalitions

Scenario 2. EPP cooperation with ECR but not with other far-right groups

- **Frequency:** high
- **Impacted areas:** divisive issues, for example, Ukraine, European Social Fund
- **Implication:** blurred boundaries between centre right and far right

Scenario 3. Cooperation between far-right groups without EPP involvement

- **Frequency:** low
- **Impacted areas:** cultural and democracy-related issues
- **Implication:** shifting the political narrative

Part II – progressive responses and lessons learned

This section examines potential responses for progressives in the EP. It is supported by key findings from the broader literature and national case studies. These examples help identify effective approaches, persisting challenges and lessons learned. Together, these elements feed into the policy brief's final section, which distils the most relevant and actionable recommendations for progressive actors in the EP seeking to counter far-right influence and strengthen democratic resilience.

Strategic response framework

The main challenge in developing a strategic response framework lies in balancing a pan-European approach with nationally tailored responses. Because political, institutional and cultural contexts vary widely across the EU, far-right response strategies need to take context into consideration. Different European regions face distinct constraints and incentives. For example, in Western Europe political divisions are often structured along post-materialist lines whereas in Southern Europe economic divisions remain more prominent.[28] Political incentives are shaped in Southern Europe by the legacy of past dictatorships and in Central and Eastern Europe by the memory of communist rule.[29] In the Baltic states, tensions surrounding relations with Russia and the presence of a Russian minority residing in these countries inform political dynamics.[30] One challenge particular to Latvia, for example, is that the ethnic cleavage limits coalition potential.[31] The emergence of geographically defined divisions also plays a key role.[32] For example, territorial nationalisms are prominent in countries such as Spain, Italy and Belgium. In other countries, such as Germany and France, emerging urban-rural divides are often anchored in discontent with mainstream politics.[33] This suggests that different political issues may be more or less salient across different national contexts.

While progressive responses should reflect the differing priorities and political dynamics across European countries, they must also be balanced with the need for a coherent, coordinated overarching strategy. Above all, progressive responses to the challenge of far-right success must be grounded within the broader framework of democratic resilience, which is understood as "the ability of a democratic system, its institutions, political actors, and citizens to prevent or react to external and internal challenges, stresses, and assaults".[34] This is because the entrenchment and normalisation of far-right parties have contributed to processes of democratic backsliding, a gradual weakening of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy,[35] in some EU member states and constitute an ongoing trend in others.

The far right presents a sustained challenge to democratic governance and resilience across Europe. Addressing it requires coordinated responses across political actors, institutions, civil society and citizens. Given the target audience and the need for a focused, feasible scope, this policy brief concentrates on **political-actor strategies** aimed at safeguarding democratic norms and countering far-right influence (see Table 1).

Table 1. Response strategies.

Political actors	• Cordon sanitaire • Cross-parliamentary coalition-building • Framing the message: strategic demarcation

Examples of actionable response strategies for progressives

In what follows, we examine different instances of responses based on the framework in Table 1.

Cordon sanitaire

The cordon sanitaire strategy excludes far-right actors from political power by denying them participation in coalitions or positions of influence. The cordon sanitaire erodes primarily from mainstream right-wing actors who tend to be more open to collaboration with the far right while a number of social democratic parties tend to maintain national cordon sanitaire policies. For example, in Sweden, the cordon sanitaire fully broke down following the 2022 election when the moderate, liberal and Christian democrat parties formed a minority government with support agreement from the Sweden Democrats. In Austria, the SPÖ has maintained a doctrine of non-cooperation since 1986, and in 2004, the SPÖ federal party resolution confirmed no coalition government with the FPÖ at the federal level.[36]

National experiences suggest that the approach can be most effective when the far right is extreme.

The extreme-right Greek Golden Dawn, during the time it enjoyed parliamentary representation, is a case in hand. The party entered the Greek parliament in 2012. Its leading cadres were tried and convicted for maintaining a criminal organisation in 2020, following the murder of left-wing activist Pavlos Fyssas in 2013. The Golden Dawn was subsequently outlawed. While mainstream parties refused to coalesce with the Golden Dawn while it was represented in the Greek parliament, thus successfully marginalising the party, this strategy is increasingly difficult to implement across Europe, as the far right has become more electorally successful and normalised.

For example, to return to the Austrian case, in 2024, the SPÖ's strategy was to bypass FPÖ, which had won the election, in coalition negotiations and ban it from forming a government. However, this strategy places the conservative ÖVP in a highly important position, as it is up to its discretion whether it will choose to enter a coalition with FPÖ.[37] Austria is often seen as the paradigmatic case of this scenario, given the early ÖVP-FPÖ coalition in 2000, long before similar dynamics emerged in other EU member states. It is noteworthy, however, that by excluding the far right from government, other parties may aid their self-portrayal as victims of the established "elite party system", and thus, leading to voter sympathy with them.[38] This pattern represents one of the key challenges across national contexts and is particularly critical at the EP level.

It is also difficult to maintain the cordon sanitaire at the local level. The constitution in some federal states in Austria contains provisions on "concentrated" governments, that is, all parties beyond a certain vote-share threshold form a government, regularly leading to FPÖ gaining executive power in these states. In many cases, parties have also voluntarily entered a regional government alongside FPÖ.[39] Even in Germany, one of the few countries still maintaining a strong cordon sanitaire, there are growing pressures at the local level to cooperate with AfD. This demonstrates that, as far-right parties become more normalised, it is progressively harder to exclude them from political debate or formal decision-making.

The cordon sanitaire is equally difficult to implement in the EP. As explained above, within the EP, a cordon sanitaire remains in place against groups such as PfE and ESN, which are largely excluded from committee chairpersonships and other influential roles. However, this exclusion does not extend to ECR, which has become increasingly normalised, voting in alignment with EPP and assuming greater positions of influence. EPP has played a significant role in weakening the cordon sanitaire, formally upholding it at a symbolic level, yet in practice using the threat of breaking it as a power-political instrument. While S&D maintains stronger cordon sanitaire positions, normalisation is likely to pose an increasing challenge to this strategy.

Overall, while the cordon sanitaire remains both a symbolic and substantive tool of democratic resilience, its practical effectiveness is challenged as far-right parties gain legitimacy and power within Europe's political mainstream. Institutional isolation may be effective in the short term, that is, within the electoral cycle, but could be accompanied by a series of unintended consequences that strengthen the far right's symbolic presence in the longer term.

Recommendation: progressives should focus on upholding the elements of the cordon sanitaire that still exist, such as limiting institutional positions for the more extreme parts of the far right. This strategy is more straightforward to implement against openly extremist actors with lower levels of electoral support. Once far-right actors surpass key electoral thresholds and become more normalised, the cordon sanitaire is more difficult to implement. In instances of cooperation between the radical right variants of the far right and the centre-right, the cordon sanitaire has already eroded. In this context, progressives should seek additional strategies (see below). It is important to note that progressives should be conscious of the risk associated with the cordon sanitaire, that is, far-right parties capitalising on their parliamentary exclusion to appear victimised and enhance their symbolic influence.[40]

Cross-parliamentary coalition-building

Political actors can build cross-parliamentary alliances that bring together different party families to present a united front in legislative decision-making. While the cordon sanitaire refers to a formal or informal pact among mainstream parties to refuse cooperation with the far right to block their access to power, cross-parliamentary coalition-building primarily involves coordination among parties across the political spectrum to oppose far-right policies, rhetoric or initiatives. In other words, the cordon sanitaire centres primarily on exclusion, while parliamentary coalition building centres primarily on active engagement: building positive coalitions with the parliament and using parliamentary instruments to build majorities and expose the far right's anti-democratic activities.

This strategy involves coordinating responses across the political spectrum, reducing fragmentation, encouraging active engagement and ultimately preventing far-right actors from exploiting divisions between parties. By aligning positions and voting strategies, mainstream parties can more effectively safeguard democratic norms and limit the far right's ability to shape parliamentary outcomes. This may involve putting in place certain legislative safeguards, such as oversight mechanisms and anti-majoritarian rules, to limit executive overreach.

Evidence suggests that this has been a successful strategy in the case of Brazil. During Jair Bolsonaro's presidency (2018-2022), established parties had remained divided and hesitant to adopt a clear position towards his authoritarian policies. This shifted in 2021 with the Federal Senate's creation of the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry (CPI) on COVID-19, which initiated a wider effort to scrutinise Bolsonaro's actions and helped revive political debate and oversight mechanisms that had previously been sidelined.[41] Overall, the attempt to form this coordinated cross-party response offered an effective checks and balances mechanism in this case.

Examples from individual European countries suggest that this strategy could also be effective at

limiting far-right influence in the European context. For example, in Austria, the chair of the Board of the National Fund for Victims of National Socialism is, by law, held by the Speaker of the National Council. After the 2024 election, this position was assumed for the first time by a far-right representative. In response, all other parties supported a legal amendment enabling the redistribution of certain responsibilities within this highly symbolic institution, thereby limiting far-right influence in a historically sensitive domain.[42]

However, in many cases, implementation has been difficult. In Hungary, for example, various forms of opposition alliances have been attempted, but genuine unity has been difficult to sustain. Short-term political incentives, focusing on potential gains within the electoral cycle, often outweigh the broader, long-term objective of restoring democratic governance, leading parties to prioritise immediate gains over collective strategy made even more difficult by an increasingly restrictive political environment.[43]

In the EP context, such a strategy would entail a closer collaboration between progressives and other parliamentary groups, which for decades constituted the centrist majority within the EP (S&D, EPP, liberals, sometimes with greens). To contain the far right within the current EP term, this strategy primarily involves collaboration with EPP, which inevitably entails compromises and trade-offs. On one hand, it may risk blurring differences within the mainstream camp and being criticised as "systemic" actors. The far right can capitalise upon this by portraying themselves as the "only" anti-establishment actors. This strategy may also require a reversal of progressive EU legislation from the previous mandate, which can put progressives in conflict with their national party and traditional values.[44]

On the other hand, the attempt to build large cross-parliamentary coalitions is likely to yield positive results by fostering large-scale active engagement against the far right's rhetoric, policies and ideas. Coalition-building, for example, may include thematic alliances between different progressive groups, for example, socialists, greens and liberals, as well as

attempts to split EPP on key issues.[45] To avoid splits within the progressive camp, it may also be helpful to distinguish between core-values-based policy areas, such as democracy and the rule of law, gender equality, and fundamental rights on one hand, and more technical issues where progressives would operate with greater flexibility and join forces with EPP without entering into any formal agreement that may compromise their social democratic values or beliefs, on the other.[46]

Furthermore, building cross-parliamentary coalitions may also help to split the far right, which is notoriously a non-unified camp at the EP level. For example, PfE and ESN were formed following the June 2024 EP election, substituting the former ID EP group and incorporating several formerly non-attached members. This reconfiguration reflects these parties' long-standing inability to form permanent alliances. This also has to do with the radical-extreme dynamic and how they want their image to come across, for example, the row between the National Rally and AfD following the latter's repatriation conference, as well as the unsuccessful attempt of the extreme-right Golden Dawn to join the ID group in the previous EU parliament. A more recent example concerning the current configuration is Meloni's rejection of Orban's attempt to create an EP right-wing super group.[47]

Recommendation: progressives should continue to pursue coordinated and consistent cooperation initiatives between democratic and pro-European forces. Acknowledging the difficulties involved in forming grander, more permanent, coalitions, this could include attempts to forge thematic majorities between progressives and EPP, as well as different progressive groups – socialists, greens and liberals – to defend specific causes. This type of cooperation has the potential to create flexible but principled coalitions that can counteract far-right pressure on European policies and, at the same time, limit the effect of the far right through targeted, tangible solutions.[48] This can also entail strengthening the operational dialogue between national parties and their delegations in the EP so that positions on key issues are better coordinated and defended in plenary sessions and during committee meetings.[49]

This strategy may also serve to divide the far-right camp, whose unity is already questionable. Progressives should attempt to exploit existing divisions within the far-right camp, such as their degree of extremism and position on economic issues and Ukraine.

Framing the message: Strategic demarcation

This refers to how progressives may position themselves in relation to far-right competitors, either by co-opting/accommodating their rhetoric and policy positions or by ignoring and/or adopting opposing rhetoric and policy positions. The latter strategy, which may be termed "strategic demarcation" involves agenda differentiation and programmatic distancing from the far right. This dynamic can play out not only in specific policy areas, such as immigration, but also in the broader framing of electoral narratives and campaign messages.[50] It can also relate to how progressives frame their message with respect to democratic resilience and the potential threat that the far right poses to democracy.

Evidence from across Europe suggests that strategic demarcation is generally the more effective long-term strategy. Attempts at co-optation may yield short-term electoral gains, namely, a single electoral cycle. However, in the longer term, they tend to have the oppositive effect. By inflating attention to the issues that far-right parties own, and therefore have a competitive advantage on, they contribute to far-right electoral success. The case of Denmark illustrates this pattern. Co-optation has proven unsustainable for social democrats, ultimately allowing the far right to shape the political agenda without losing support.[51] In recent Danish elections, the far right continued to surge. The UK example is also illustrative. Although the Labour Party has adopted strict immigration positions, Reform continues to perform well in the polls. Scholarly research reinforces this conclusion, showing that co-optation rarely weakens far-right movements and may instead legitimise their discourse.[52] This approach carries at least two critical drawbacks.

First, adopting far-right positions contradicts core progressive values such as equality, rights and solidarity. Second, from a strategic and electoral standpoint, it is not a promising path either.

In contrast, strategic demarcation, that is, firmly rejecting far-right narratives, defending liberal democratic values, and refraining from co-opting far-right policies, has shown more positive results. In Spain, for example, the Socialist Party (PSOE) has maintained government since 2023 and continues to perform strongly in opinion polls (at the time of writing), demonstrating that principled opposition to the far right can align with sustained political success. In addition, sharing examples where EU interventions effectively upheld democratic norms could help reduce Euroscepticism.[53]

It is important to note here that democracy-focused messaging is difficult to calibrate. National experiences show that broad warnings about far-right threats to democracy are rarely effective, unless paired with progressive policy solutions that address people's everyday concerns. Such messages often fall flat because many voters equate democracy primarily with elections and do not perceive it as being in immediate danger. Evidence indicates that partisanship and tangible policy outcomes carry more weight with voters than general claims about democratic erosion.[54] In other words, non-specific appeals to "defend democracy" are unlikely to gain traction unless linked to concrete issues. A recent example is Kamala Harris's 2024 US presidential campaign, where broad democratic framing failed to resonate with key segments of the electorate.

Recommendation: Progressives should avoid replicating the far right's narratives on migration. Instead, they should adopt strategic demarcation strategies and advance positive, solutions-oriented messaging on core progressive priorities such as housing, healthcare, pensions, working conditions, social integration, public transport and fair taxation. Democratic messaging should be used selectively and anchored in specific policy issues, emphasising constructive proposals rather than simply criticising the far right as anti-democratic. A targeted, applied

approach to democracy resonates more effectively than broad warnings.

Conclusion and policy recommendations

A successful progressive response should take into account the following considerations:

The challenge of far-right normalisation: normalisation is multidimensional. It occurs through discourse, policy framing, day-to-day interactions in parliament and patterns of cooperation. This presents a fundamental obstacle for crafting sustainable progressive responses. Far-right mainstream acceptance and institutional power makes it increasingly difficult for progressive and democratic actors to contain their influence without compromising democratic norms themselves. These actors operate within the formal boundaries of democracy, seeking to erode it from within through incremental institutional and normative change.[55]

Sustainability of response: this refers to whether a response is designed to counter the far right in the short term, namely, within an electoral cycle, or whether it seeks to build a more durable, long-term defence of democratic values. Both types are valuable and can inform a step-by-step sustainable and coherent strategy over time that strengthens democratic resilience.

Coordination: there is an important balance to strike between taking national contextual conditions into account on one hand and developing a coordinated response in the EP on the other.[56] While there are different national contexts to consider, positions that are too divergent also signal uncertainty and vulnerability. Therefore, coordination and the ability to put forward a coherent message is important.

Taking these considerations into account, in this policy brief, we recommend the following progressive actionable strategies.

Recommendation 1: progressives should maintain the elements of the cordon sanitaire that still hold, namely, the exclusion of extreme actors. At the same time, complementary strategies are needed for those parts that have collapsed, namely, in the case of increasing normalisation of the radical right variant. In this context, progressives should secure broad cross-parliamentary backing and pair the strategy with complementary measures to prevent normalisation and avoid reinforcing the far right's symbolic influence.

Recommendation 2: progressives should strengthen coordinated cooperation among democratic, pro-European forces by forming thematic coalitions, especially with EPP and across other pro-European groups, and improving coordination between national parties and EP delegations to defend key issues and counter far-right influence through targeted, practical solutions. This strategy may also serve to divide the far-right camp, whose unity is already questionable. Progressives should attempt to exploit existing divisions within the far-right camp, such as their degree of extremism and positions on economic issues and Ukraine.

Recommendation 3: progressives should reject far-right migration narratives and prioritise positive, solution-focused messages on housing, healthcare, pensions, work, integration, transport and fair taxation. Democratic messaging should be targeted and policy-specific, emphasising constructive alternatives that resonate more effectively than broad, abstract warnings about democratic decline.

APPENDICES

European Conservative and Reformists (ECR) – composition EP 2024-2029

1. Alliance for the Union of Romanians (Alianţa pentru Unirea Românilor, AUR)
2. Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia)
3. Civic Democratic Party (Občanská demokratická strana)
4. Conservative Action Party (ACT) (Partidul Acţiunea Conservatoare)
5. Denmark Democrats (Danmarksdemokraterne)
6. Dutch Reformed Party (Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij)
7. Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania-Christian Families Alliance (Lietuvos lenkų rinkimų akcija-Krikščioniškų šeimų sąjunga)
8. Finns Party (Perussuomalaiset)
9. Greek Solution (Ελληνική Λύση)
10. Home and National Gathering (DOM i Nacionalno Okupljanje)
11. Identity-Liberties (Identité-Libertés)
12. Law and Justice Party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość
13. Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union party (Lietuvos valstiečių ir žaliųjų sąjunga)
14. National Alliance "All For Latvia!"-"For Fatherland and Freedom/LNNK" (Nacionālā apvienība "Visu Latvijai!"-"Tēvzemei un Brīvībai/LNNK"
15. National Popular Front (Ethniko Laiko Metopo, ELAM)
16. New Flemish Alliance (Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie)
17. Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna)
18. The Estonian Centre Party (Eesti Keskerakond, EK)
19. The Romanian National Conservative Party (Partidul Naţional Conservator Român, PNCR)
20. There Is Such a People (Има такъв народ, ITN)
21. United List (Apvienotais Saraksts, AS)

Patriots for Europe (PfE) – composition EP 2024-2029

1. Rassemblement National (France)
2. Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Alliance (Hungary)
3. Lega Nord / Salvini Premier (Italy)
4. ANO 2011 (Czech Republic)
5. Partij Voor de Vrijheid (Netherlands)
6. Vox (Spain)
7. Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (Austria)
8. Vlaams Belang (Flanders)
9. Chega (Portugal)
10. Ruch Narodowy (Poland)
11. Dansk Folkeparti (Denmark)
12. Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond (Estonia)
13. Foni Logikis (Greece)
14. Latvija Pirmajā Vietā (Latvia)
15. Motoriste Sobe (Czech Republic)
16. Přísaha (Czech Republic)

Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN) – composition EP 2024-2029

1. Alternative für Deutschland (Germany)
2. Wasraschdane (Bulgaria)
3. Reconquête (France)
4. Tautos ir teisingumo sąjunga (Lithuania)
5. Nowa Nadzieja (Poland)
6. Hnutie Republika (Slovakia)
7. Mi Hazánk Mozgalom (Hungary)
8. Forum voor Democratie (Netherlands)

Appendix 2: EP votes

2023 and 2024 reports on Ukraine

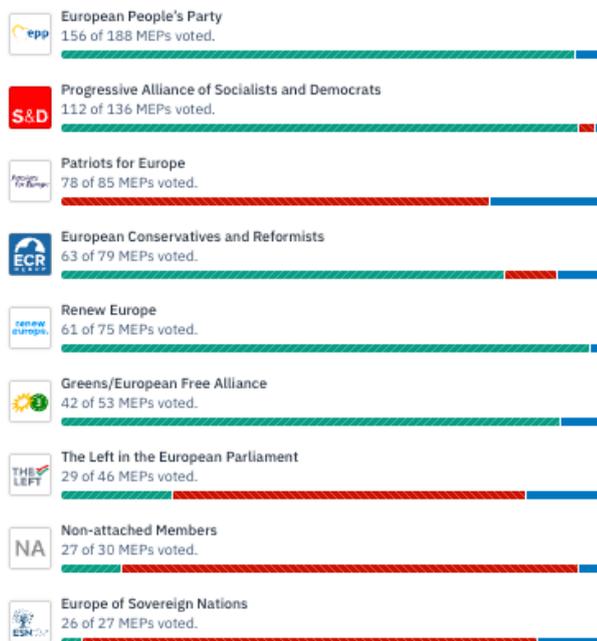Sep 9, 2025 · A10-0154/2025 · Proposition de résolution (ensemble du texte)

- MEPs reassert unwavering commitment to Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity
- European Commission should open negotiation clusters to advance the country's EU membership bid at the fastest pace possible
- The EU and its member states must remain Ukraine's strategic allies

On this page: Vote result Amendments More information Open data Sources Report an error

👍 70% 👎 23% ▶

For: 418. Against: 135. Abstentions: 41. In total, 594 MEPs voted. 125 MEPs didn't vote.

MEPs **Political Groups** Countries

European People's Party
156 of 188 MEPs voted.

Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats
112 of 136 MEPs voted.

Patriots for Europe
78 of 85 MEPs voted.

European Conservatives and Reformists
63 of 79 MEPs voted.

Renew Europe
61 of 75 MEPs voted.

Greens/European Free Alliance
42 of 53 MEPs voted.

The Left in the European Parliament
29 of 46 MEPs voted.

Non-attached Members
27 of 30 MEPs voted.

Europe of Sovereign Nations
26 of 27 MEPs voted.

European Social Fund (ESF+): specific measures to address strategic challenges

Sep 10, 2025 · A10-0122/2025 · Accord provisoire - Am 32

- Funding can be channelled to new priorities such as defence industrial capacity, military mobility, affordable housing, and water resilience
- Dual-use investments suitable for civilian and military use to be prioritised
- Decarbonisation, strategic technologies, and energy interconnectors also included
- Rule of law conditionality for funding not affected

On this page: Vote result More information Open data Sources Report an error

👍 69% 👎 23% 👎 9%

For: 453. Against: 149. Abstentions: 59. In total, 661 MEPs voted. 58 MEPs didn't vote.

MEPs **Political Groups** Countries

European People's Party
175 of 188 MEPs voted.

Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats
127 of 136 MEPs voted.

Patriots for Europe
80 of 85 MEPs voted.

European Conservatives and Reformists
73 of 79 MEPs voted.

Renew Europe
66 of 75 MEPs voted.

Greens/European Free Alliance
48 of 53 MEPs voted.

The Left in the European Parliament
36 of 46 MEPs voted.

Non-attached Members
30 of 30 MEPs voted.

Europe of Sovereign Nations
26 of 27 MEPs voted.

The Commission's 2024 Rule of Law report

Jun 18, 2025 · A10-0100/2025 · Proposition de résolution (ensemble du texte)

- Persistent, systemic, and new threats to the rule of law across the EU
- Worrying trends: non-compliance with court rulings, civic space erosion, and attacks on EU values
- Calls for strengthened enforcement tools and urgent follow-up

On this page: Vote result   Amendments   More information   Open data   Sources   Report an error

👍 62%   👎 32%   🗳

For: 405. Against: 210. Abstentions: 36. In total, 651 MEPs voted. 68 MEPs didn't vote.

MEPs   **Political Groups**   Countries

European People's Party
162 of 188 MEPs voted.

Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats
125 of 136 MEPs voted.

Patriots for Europe
78 of 85 MEPs voted.

European Conservatives and Reformists
73 of 79 MEPs voted.

Renew Europe
65 of 75 MEPs voted.

Greens/European Free Alliance
52 of 53 MEPs voted.

The Left in the European Parliament
42 of 46 MEPs voted.

Non-attached Members
27 of 30 MEPs voted.

Europe of Sovereign Nations
27 of 27 MEPs voted.

Recommendation to the Council on the EU priorities for the 69th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women

Dec 19, 2024 · A10-0030/2024 · Proposition de résolution (ensemble du texte)
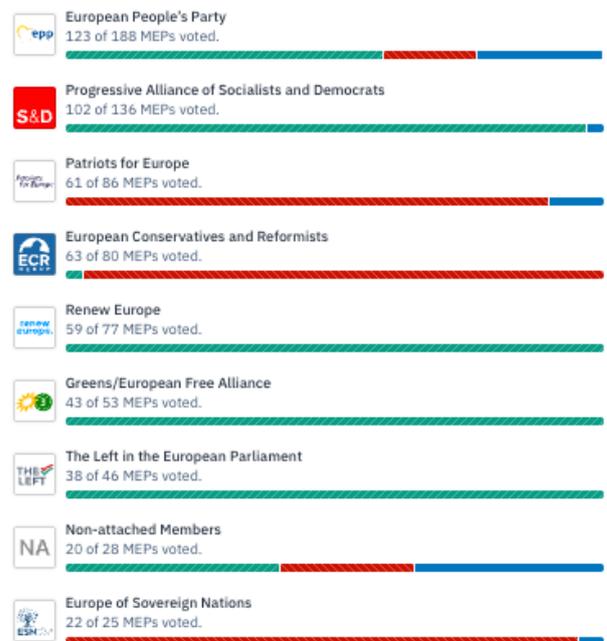
- Need to resist efforts to roll back existing rights amid pressure from anti-rights movements
- Combat the feminisation of poverty
- Health care including safe and legal abortions should be available to everyone

On this page: Vote result   Amendments   More information   Open data   Sources   Report an error

👍 61%   👎 31%   🗳 9%

For: 322. Against: 163. Abstentions: 46. In total, 531 MEPs voted. 188 MEPs didn't vote.

MEPs   **Political Groups**   Countries

European People's Party
123 of 188 MEPs voted.

Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats
102 of 136 MEPs voted.

Patriots for Europe
61 of 86 MEPs voted.

European Conservatives and Reformists
63 of 80 MEPs voted.

Renew Europe
59 of 77 MEPs voted.

Greens/European Free Alliance
43 of 53 MEPs voted.

The Left in the European Parliament
38 of 46 MEPs voted.

Non-attached Members
20 of 28 MEPs voted.

Europe of Sovereign Nations
22 of 25 MEPs voted.

Table 2. Electoral performance of far-right parties, 2024 EP elections.

Country	Party	%	Rank	EP Group
Austria	Austrian Freedom Party	25.4	1st	PfE
Belgium	Flemish Block	14.5	1st	PfE
Bulgaria	Revival	14	4th	ESN
Croatia	Homeland Movement	8.8	3rd	ECR
Cyprus	National People's Front	11.2	4th	ECR
Czechia	Freedom and Direct Democracy	5.7	7th	ESN
Denmark	Danish People's Party	6.4	9th	PfE
	Denmark Democrats	7.4	5th	ECR
Estonia	Conservative People's Party of Estonia	12.40	5th	ECR
Finland	Finns	7.6	6th	ECR
France	National Rally	31.4	1st	PfE
Germany	Alternative for Germany	15.9	2nd	ESN[57]
Greece	Greek Solution	9.3	4th	ECR
	Victory	4.4	6th	NI
	Voice of Reason	3.04	8th	PfE
Hungary	Fidesz	44.8	1st	PfE
	Our Homeland	6.7	4th	ESN
Italy	Brothers of Italy	28.8	1st	ECR
	League	9	5th	PfE
Latvia	National Alliance	22	2nd	ECR
	Latvia First	6.2	7th	ECR
Lithuania	People and Justice Union	5.5	7th	ESN
Netherlands	Freedom Party	17	2nd	PfE
Poland	Law and Justice	36.2	2nd	ECR
Portugal	Chega	10	3rd	PfE
Romania	Alliance for the Union of Romanians	14.9	2nd	ECR
	SOS Romania	5.03	5th	NI
Slovakia	Slovak National Party	1.9	10th	No seat gained
	Republic Movement	12.5	3rd	NI
Slovenia	Slovenian Democratic Party	30.6	1st	EPP
Spain	Vox	9.6	3rd	PfE
Sweden	Sweden Democrats	13.2	4th	ECR

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ON SIMILAR TOPICS

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE MAINSTREAM RIGHT IN WESTERN EUROPE

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

ABSTRACT

In light of significant demographic and societal shifts in Western Europe over recent decades, the political landscape has undergone a profound transformation. While analyses often centre on the decline of social democracy and the ascendance of the populist radical right, there has been a notable oversight regarding the status of the mainstream right. Yet, examining the mainstream right is imperative, given its historical role in bolstering liberal democracy in the region since World War II – a role no longer assured. While the empirical evidence presented here reveals that mainstream right parties across Western Europe generally uphold support for liberal democracy, there is a concerning trend emerging: an increasing willingness to align with the populist radical right, either directly or indirectly, to gain power. The formation of such coalitions poses significant challenges, as they risk normalising the rhetoric and policies of the populist radical right. It is incumbent upon social democratic forces not to remain passive observers of this trend but to actively confront it. This entails not only scrutinising the actions of mainstream right forces and condemning any attempts to undermine liberal democracy but also crafting new narratives and alliances. This policy brief summarises the main findings of a larger project on the transformation of the mainstream right in Western Europe and aims to demonstrate that, by capitalising on widespread discontent toward the populist radical right and leveraging its own comparatively favourable public perception, social democratic forces have the potential to effectively counter this troubling development.

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HOW YOUNG PEOPLE FACING DISADVANTAGE VIEW DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE
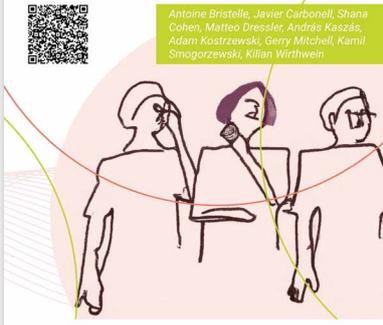
Antoine Bristelle, Javier Carbonell, Shana Cohen, Matteo Dressler, András Kaszás, Adam Kostrzewski, Gerry Mitchell, Kamil Smogorzewski, Kilian Wirthwein

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INEQUALITY AND POPULISM

PROSPECTS FOR NEW SOCIALIST POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Unai Gómez-Hernández, Alberto Bortolotti, Dennis Gottschlich, Maja Gergorić

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FROM POSTS TO POLLS

LESSONS FROM THE 2024 EUROPEAN ELECTIONS ON STRENGTHENING YOUNG PEOPLE'S ENGAGEMENT THROUGH EFFECTIVE SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGIES

Matteo Dressler, Elena Avramovska, Miriam Candelù, Ognjan Denkovski, Neele Eilers, Michael Jennewein, Tobias Spöri

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DEMONETISATION OF ANTI-DEMOCRATIC AND EXTREME CONTENT

ABSTRACT

The proposed European Democracy Shield (EUDS) aims to fortify the EU's democratic systems against disinformation, foreign interference, and evolving digital threats. While building on the existing regulatory backbone, the Shield's effectiveness will depend on actionable solutions that address the business models fuelling disinformation.

A central recommendation to ensure the success of the EUDS is to make demonetisation of disinformation a priority, ensuring that online platforms and disinformation creators cannot profit from or facilitate the spread of false content. This includes enforcing transparency in ad revenue sharing, particularly for influencers, and requiring disclosure of political ties through established ad repositories.
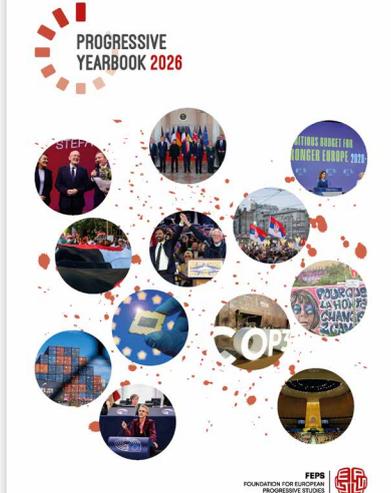
The Shield should also address gaps in national language moderation, ensuring platforms allocate resources proportionally to user bases, and update trust and safety tools to filter AI-generated, mass-produced content.

Furthermore, stable funding for civil society and independent journalism must be integrated into EU budget priorities. By focusing on these targeted measures, the Shield can move beyond patchwork regulation and provide a future-proof framework for defending democracy in the digital age.

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