

MORE THAN THE FAR RIGHT

New (old) threats to democracy in the EU

Edited by Adam Balcer

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Introduction

Authoritarian and populist tendencies accompanied by the dismantling of the rule of law represent – though to a considerably varying degree – a fundamental challenge unprecedented in the EU’s history. Overall, they fundamentally present a threat to democracy in many member states. Liberal democracy, based on deliberative political debates aimed at reaching consensus that protects individual and minority rights, faces a threat especially from the rise of the far right. This ultimately stems from an increase in nationalism and xenophobia. However, threats to democracy are not limited only to the ascendancy of the radical right.

Firstly, the development of social media has revolutionized politics across the world, creating more challenges than chances for liberal democracies. These ideas strengthen political divisions, promote populism, and deepen polarization. In effect, polarization has become an integral part of the political and social life of many European countries as such. The ideas of the radical right have spilled over into the mainstream but also influence the far left as well. Indeed, authoritarian tendencies can be observed in certain far-left parties, which have enjoyed a considerable increase in popularity. This has mostly been in reaction to the surge of the far right (for instance, in Belgium and France). However, even more nuanced trends represent an emergence of hybrid parties that were originally left and far left but have ultimately transformed into a national conservative left. They often also contest the values of liberal democracy and the rule of law.

The report “More than the far right: New (old) threats to democracy in the EU” focuses on three issues: the negative impact of social media on democracy in the EU, the issue of polarization and how it undermines the rule of law, and finally, the phenomenon of the national conservative left. The first article, which is titled “The Algorithmic Threat: How Social Media and Media Moguls Challenge Democracy in Europe” and written by Steven Stillman, shows that social media, once celebrated as a tool for empowerment and civic participation, is now a structural threat to democratic stability. Technologies designed to connect citizens are fragmenting the very public sphere upon which democracy depends. Guillem Ripoll, in his article “In the eye of the beholder? Corruption perception as a polarization symptom in Spain”, analyses how this country is suffering from rising affective political polarization. The phenomenon of *confirmation bias* subsequently impacts how citizens process information, causing a serious negative impact on the social perception of corruption. Finally, Tomáš Strážay, in his contribution “Alignment or Isolation – the bitter end of ambitions to establish a conservative left party group in the European Parliament”, describes the emerging phenomenon of a combination of left-wing political stances, nationalism and social conservatism. These are often mixed with authoritarian tendencies and have even resulted in unsuccessful attempts to create a new political alliance in the European Parliament based on this hybrid political ideology.

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The Algorithmic Threat: How Social Media and Media Moguls Challenge Democracy in Europe

Steven Stillman

Main thesis

1. Our lives including politics have become increasingly digital. Social media, once celebrated as a tool for empowerment and civic participation, is now a structural threat to democratic stability.
2. Three interrelated dynamics have brought us to the edge of a cliff: the deepening of ideological polarization through algorithmic personalization; the rapid diffusion of misinformation that corrodes trust in institutions; and the concentration of communicative power in the hands of a few global media moguls. In the end, technologies designed to connect citizens are fragmenting the very public sphere upon which democracy depends.

Introduction

In recent years, European democracies have faced growing turbulence. Once grounded in the “slow” deliberation of newspapers, parties, and civic associations, political debate now unfolds in an environment dominated by a handful of digital platforms. The transformation has been revolutionary in scope but has had many unintended consequences. Social media promised to democratize communication and empower citizens; instead, it has produced new forms of manipulation, polarization, and concentration of power. The European Union, despite its efforts to regulate digital markets and protect privacy, now finds itself confronting a deeper challenge: the erosion of democratic cohesion in a system increasingly shaped by opaque algorithms and powerful media moguls.

Echo Chambers and the Architecture of Polarization

Beyond mere ideological sorting, the design of social media platforms reshapes how political identities form and persist. The reinforcement of belief systems occurs through feedback loops where engagement metrics substitute for validation, creating self-confirming environments that discourage doubt and amplify certainty. In the European context, this phenomenon has been linked to the rise of populist, mostly far right, movements from Italy to Hungary, where social networks enable direct emotional mobilization that bypasses traditional media institutions.¹ Algorithms, in effect, act as political actors themselves—structuring visibility, relevance, and attention in ways that redefine what counts as public discourse. Because of this, digital populism has spilled-over directly into the political mainstream.

¹ Lorenzo Mosca, Mario Quaranta, Are digital platforms potential drivers of the populist vote? A comparative analysis of France, Germany and Italy, *Information, Communication & Society*, 2024, 24(10), pp. 1441–1459. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1894211>

The defining feature of social media is its algorithmic personalization. Platforms claim to show users what they “want to see,” yet in practice they amplify what keeps users engaged – typically, emotionally charged or sensational content. This logic fosters echo chambers in which individuals are primarily exposed to views that confirm their preexisting beliefs. Empirical analyses across platforms show that the architecture of recommendation and follow networks produces clustered information flows and reinforces homophily, with measurable consequences for political segregation online.²

Political scientists have long noted that a well-functioning democracy requires citizens to encounter opposing viewpoints and to test their opinions through exposure to different perspectives³. When algorithms systematically filter out dissenting content, this process collapses. Empirical studies show that online environments increasingly mirror ideological silos: far-right voters cluster around nationalist influencers, environmental activists inhabit separate digital spaces, and cross-cutting political dialogue is disappearing.

The Viral Logic of Falsehood

A second challenge arises from the informational disorder that social media platforms enable. Misinformation, conspiracy theories, and outright fabrications spread faster online than verified facts. Research on the diffusion of true and false news on Twitter found that falsehoods travel significantly farther, faster, and more broadly than truthful stories, a pattern driven by novelty and emotional arousal rather than simple bot amplification⁴. Such dynamics systematically advantage false narratives in the attention economy.

Falsehoods do not simply compete with facts; they often outperform them because they exploit human cognitive biases. Research in behavioral psychology shows that novelty, fear, and moral outrage are powerful triggers of attention and memory. Misinformation leverages these traits to secure its spread, while fact-checking struggles to achieve comparable virality. In European elections and referenda, coordinated misinformation campaigns have repeatedly distorted public perception – from foreign interference in the Brexit campaign to domestic manipulation during national elections in France and Spain.

The COVID-19 pandemic offered a stark case study in the harms this can cause. The European Commission documented an “infodemic” of health-related disinformation that endangered public health and strained institutional trust⁵. Coordinated campaigns and the rapid viral spread of misleading health claims eroded confidence in vaccines and public authorities in several member states.

Traditional gatekeepers of information – editors, journalists, and broadcasters – once filtered content before it reached mass audiences. Social media inverted this order: anyone can publish instantly, and algorithms determine visibility based on engagement rather than credibility. The resulting marketplace of attention rewards extremism and undermines trust in institutions.

2 Matteo Cinelli, et al., The echo chamber effect on social media, *PNAS*, 2021, 118(9). <https://www.pnas.org/doi/epdf/10.1073/pnas.2023301118>

3 Diana C. Mutz, *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative Versus Participatory Democracy*, Cambridge, 2006.

4 Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, Sinan Aral, The spread of true and false news online, *Science*, 2018, 359(6380), pp. 1146–1151.

5 European Commission, *Tackling coronavirus disinformation: Commission’s COVID-19 disinformation monitoring programme*, Brussels 2021.

Incentives and the Political Economy of Platforms

A third and often overlooked dimension lies in the incentives driving both the platforms and the tycoons who control them. Social media companies are profit-maximizing enterprises whose revenues depend heavily on advertising and user engagement; the longer users remain active, the more data can be harvested and monetized. From this vantage, polarization and outrage are not mere byproducts but effective business strategies: algorithms are optimized to maximize clicks, likes, and shares – proxies for attention that reward emotionally charged content.

Platforms operate within a framework that converts user behavior into tradable data. In this model, the human experience itself becomes a raw material for behavioral prediction and commercial exploitation. The more emotionally engaged the user, the more valuable their data profile. This logic not only explains the persistence of polarizing content but also reveals why platforms have little incentive to prioritize democratic integrity over engagement metrics.

Social Media Moguls

Concentration of ownership in the hands of a few billionaires further aggravates the problem. A number of media tycoons, especially Elon Musk and Rupert Murdoch, have a distinct libertarian strain—one that cloaks market dominance in the rhetoric of “free speech” and hostility toward regulation.⁶ Musk’s stewardship of X (formerly Twitter) and Murdoch’s control over outlets such as *Fox News* and *The Times* exemplify how control over information infrastructures can be leveraged to advance deregulatory and anti-tax agendas that align with their broader corporate and personal financial interests. Moreover, Musk has increasingly become a supporter of far-right and libertarian authoritarian.

The political influence of media moguls extends beyond the ownership of platforms to the shaping of ideological narratives that serve their material interests. By promoting minimal state intervention and low taxation, they not only protect their vast holdings but also weaken the fiscal and institutional capacities of democratic governments to regulate digital markets. In this sense, their ideological crusade for “freedom” is less a defense of open discourse than a strategic project of preserving economic power—one that turns social media platforms into instruments of both political persuasion and self-enrichment.

They have also started to interfere directly in European politics on an unprecedented scale. For instance, in December 2024, Musk unequivocally endorsed the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) by tweeting “Only the AfD can save Germany” while re-posting a video from a radical right German political activist.

The European Dilemma: Regulation without Suppression

The European Union has responded with ambitious regulatory instruments aimed at altering these incentives. The General Data Protection Regulation (*GDPR*) established high standards for privacy. The Digital Services Act (*DSA*) and the Digital Markets Act (*DMA*) create new rules for platform accountability, transparency in content moderation, and the

⁶ Liv McMahon, US hits out at EU’s ‘suffocating regulations’ after it fines Elon Musk’s X, *BBC*, 05.12.2025. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c4g9kejzvw0o>

market behavior of “gatekeepers.”⁷ These frameworks mark a notable shift: regulators now demand greater disclosure about algorithmic systems and create mechanisms to curb anti-competitive conduct.

The EU’s regulatory approach must navigate a uniquely delicate balance: how to impose democratic oversight without undermining the freedoms it seeks to protect. European policymakers face the dual challenge of countering the monopolistic behavior of global tech giants while fostering innovation and open communication. The DSA and DMA symbolize an attempt to articulate a distinctly European digital sovereignty—one that rejects the *laissez-faire* ethos of Silicon Valley and the authoritarian surveillance models of Beijing. Yet, implementation across diverse political and legal systems remains uneven, revealing a deeper question of cultural alignment: can regulation alone restore civic trust and epistemic coherence in a fragmented public sphere?

Regulation faces both political and philosophical limits. Too much state intervention risks sliding into censorship or state control of speech – outcomes incompatible with liberal democracy. Too little regulation, however, leaves the public sphere vulnerable to private manipulation and foreign interference. The EU tries to strike a balance between protecting open discourse and preventing its exploitation. This requires not only legal tools but also public investment in digital literacy, independent journalism, and civic media.

Reclaiming the Public Sphere

The European Union stands at a crossroads in its confrontation with the algorithmic age. Efforts such as the DSA, DMA, and GDPR mark the most ambitious attempt anywhere in the world to reclaim sovereignty over digital communication, yet they remain only partial remedies. The deeper problem lies not merely in regulating platforms but in rebuilding the civic foundations that sustain democracy: a shared epistemic space, a commitment to pluralism, and a public capable of critical thinking and responsible engagement.

At stake is the survival of the democratic public sphere itself. Ultimately, defending democracy in the digital age requires confronting a concentration of power – both technological and economic – that now shapes political communication. When a handful of owners can decide which voices are amplified and which are suppressed, democratic sovereignty is already compromised. As the digital revolution enters its next phase – with artificial intelligence systems poised to further blur the boundaries between truth and fabrication – Europe’s response will serve as a test case for whether liberal democracy can adapt without compromising its core values. To defend democracy today is to defend the conditions of truth itself.

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In the eye of the beholder? Corruption perception as a polarization symptom in Spain

Guillem Ripoll

Main thesis

1. Spain suffers from rising affective political polarization, which through *confirmation bias* impacts how citizens process information and has a significant impact on the social perception of corruption.
2. CIS data shows that corruption in Spain has transitioned from a transversal “valence issue” to a subjective marker of affective polarization.

Introduction

In recent decades, Spain has transitioned from a political landscape defined by stability to one characterized by volatility and entrenched division. However, the academic consensus suggests that we are not merely facing a disagreement over policies (ideological polarization), but a deeper, more visceral phenomenon known as affective polarization: the political opponent is no longer viewed as a legitimate adversary but as an existential threat to the nation or the democratic system.⁸ Polarization is essential for understanding how citizens process information. It acts as a perceptual screen, subjugating objective reality to partisan loyalty. Through *confirmation bias*, people select and filter information that adheres to their preexisting beliefs, while ignoring or minimizing conflicting information. Affective polarization does not just govern who we vote for, it governs what we see. It causes perceptions of corruption as a problem to vary depending on one’s political preferences.

Polarization with a Spanish flavor

Historically, Spain has been divided by a deep-seated fracture between progressives and conservatives, which manifested violently in the Carlist Wars of the 19th century and the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). Although the democratic transition sought to bridge this divide through politically built consensus, these historical antagonisms are the seeds of the country’s current identity-based politics, which have reactivated affective polarization. However, while this phenomenon has historically affected Spain, the current manifestation has specific contours.

First, the most distinct feature is the persistence of a bipolar logic within a fragmented multiparty reality. Despite the explosion of the party system (with the entry of Podemos, Ciudadanos, and later VOX), the electorate continues to coalesce into two antagonistic blocs.⁹

⁸ Mariano Torcal, Myths and truths about emotional polarization in Spain, *Revista de Occidente*, 2024 (521), pp. 17-32.

⁹ Turnout in the last national elections was almost 67%. The right bloc had 171 deputies, the left bloc had 152 deputies, and the remaining 27 deputies represented regional political parties.

This dynamic has been further complicated by the emergence of the radical right. Comellas-Bonsfills and Torcal¹⁰ provide longitudinal evidence linking the rise of VOX to the intensification of these affective polarization dynamics. *Second*, recent literature highlights that affective polarization is mainly a top-down phenomenon. For example, Sánchez-Ferrer and Torcal¹¹ show that political representatives in Spain exhibit significant levels of affective polarization, drawing on data from a 2022 to 2023 survey of Spanish Members of Parliament in the national and regional parliaments. *Third*, this top-down polarization is amplified by the digital ecosystem. Ruiz-Sánchez and Alcántara-Plá¹² observe that media discourses have become key vectors for cementing polarization in Spain. They argue that the digital campaign sphere has weaponized the “Us vs. Them” dichotomy, normalizing populist discourses that thrive on confrontation rather than deliberation.

This framework is useful to study whether in Spain corruption is an objective problem or a subjective partisan weapon. The assumption is that when a Spanish voter encounters news about corruption affecting their preferred party, the cognitive mechanism of confirmation bias facilitates the rejection of this conflicting information to preserve internal coherence.

Corruption as a symptom of Spanish polarization

To inspect whether polarization is rising, a descriptive analysis was performed. Although Spain is not a corrupt country per se, the CPI¹³ shows a substantial increase in corruption perceptions over the last 12 years. The main aim is to isolate the evolution of public opinion among the electorates of the two main parties that have governed Spain during this period: the *Partido Popular* (PP) and the *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (PSOE). This specific segmentation serves as a proxy for measuring “partisan bias”, or the tendency of voters to minimize corruption affecting their preferred party while maximizing it when affecting the opponent.

The analysis was performed using the “Barometers” series, available from the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS). Data was extracted from the monthly study corresponding to October for each year between 2004 and 2025. The choice of October as a “sentinel month” allows for a consistent annual comparison, avoiding seasonal biases often present in summer or holiday periods, while capturing the beginning of the political year in Spain. The primary variable analysed was the response to the question: “What is, in your opinion, the main problem that currently exists in Spain?” The responses related to “Corruption and fraud” as the *first* main problem were studied and were crossed with the variable “Vote recall in the most recent General Elections”. Figure 1 illustrates the evolution of corruption perception as a primary concern among these two voting blocs over two decades. The analysis reveals three distinct phases that correlate with the country’s political climate.

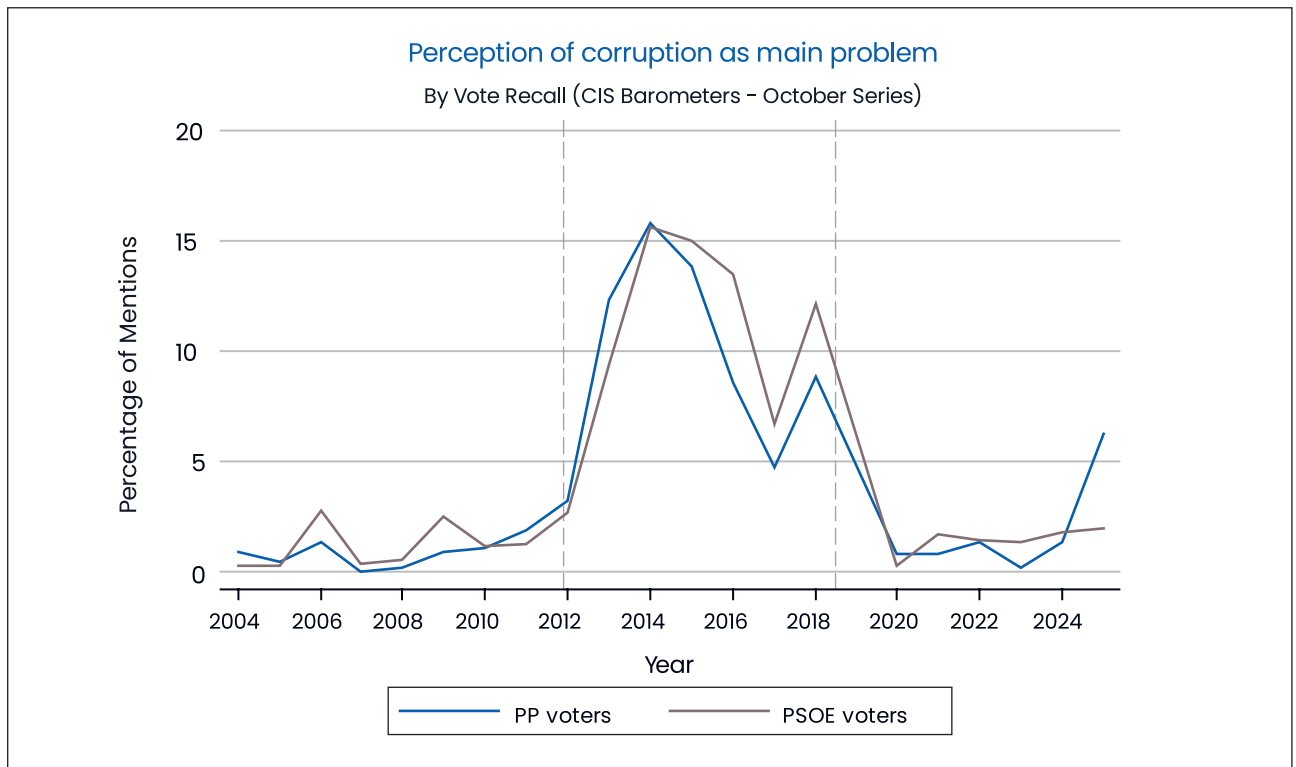
10 Josep Maria Comellas-Bonsfills, Mariano Torcal, A Longitudinal Study on the Dynamic Relationship Between Affective Polarization and Radical Right’s Emergence: The Case of VOX in Spain. *Political Studies*, 2025.

11 Leonardo Sánchez-Ferrer, Mariano Torcal, Affective polarization and consensus building among parliamentary elites, *American Behavioral Scientist*, 2025.

12 Ana Ruiz-Sánchez, Manuel Alcántara-Plá, Us vs. Them: Polarization and populist discourses in the online electoral campaign in Spain, [in:] *Populist Discourse. Critical Approaches to Contemporary Politics*, Edited By Encarnación Hidalgo-Tenorio, Miguel-Ángel Benítez-Castro, Francesca De Cesare, London/NY 2019, pp. 103-119.

13 Corruption Perception Index. The score for 2012 was 65, and the score for 2024 was 56 (100 means no corruption and 0 means total corruption). Information available at <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2024/index/esp>

Figure 1. Perception of corruption as main problem, by vote recall (CIS Barometers - October series)



The first phase (2004-2011) reflects a period of relative latency. Perception of corruption remained very low (below 5%) and homogeneous between both electorates. The most significant phenomenon occurred in the second phase (2012–2016). During these years, coinciding with the severe economic crisis and the emergence of systemic scandals (such as the *Gürtel* case affecting the PP and the *ERE* case affecting the PSOE¹⁴), the graph shows a vertical synchronization. In 2014, concern peaked at over 15% for both groups. This suggests that the magnitude of the scandals turned corruption into a valence issue, a problem so evident that not even polarization could mask it among government supporters.

However, the third phase (2018-2025) marks an intensification of polarization. As the graph shows, in the most recent year (2025), we observe a scissor effect. During all previous years, PP voters themselves identified corruption as a major problem at rates almost identical to PSOE voters. However, in 2025 there is a tendency change. While concern among PP voters (now in opposition) has begun to rise again, reaching 6.3% in 2025, concern among PSOE voters (now in government) has flattened to residual levels (2%). The current government has been surrounded by different scandals during the last year (for instance, the *Ábalos-Koldo* case, the *David Sánchez* case or the *Leire* case¹⁵), which together with *confirmation bias* in part explain this difference.

14 The *Gürtel* case (2009–2018) was a corruption scandal involving PP, characterized by an illegal kickback scheme for public contracts and parallel party financing, which ultimately triggered the 2018 Motion of No Confidence against Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy. The *ERE* case involved the misappropriation of public funds designated for redundancy packages by the Andalusian regional government of PSOE between 2000 and 2009, leading to the conviction of two former regional presidents.

15 The *Ábalos-Koldo* case refers to the alleged collection of illegal commissions in public contracts, implicating the advisor of former Minister José Luis Ábalos (PSOE). This scandal also involved misconduct with women. The *David Sánchez* case involves the judicial investigation into the current Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez's brother regarding alleged nepotism linked to his public position. The *Leire Díez* case concerns the investigation of a former PSOE operative and Correos/Post executive, for alleged obstruction of justice and bribery attempts aimed at halting police investigations affecting the government.

The divergence appearing in 2025 is relevant. It might be an indicator of the fact that corruption is no longer a transversal concern, but a problem inspected by a partisan logic. It is, therefore, an example of the current context of high polarization. While the objective presence of judicial cases remains in the media landscape, the subjective interpretation of these cases differs radically depending on political affiliation. The 2025 data confirms that polarization acts as a cognitive lens: for the government's electorate corruption is a minor issue or an external threatening narrative, whereas for the opposition it remains a central grievance. This decoupling of reality from perception is one of the clearest symptoms of the polarization characterizing the current Spanish political system.

A clear danger for the Spanish democratic system

Corruption in Spain has transitioned from a transversal “valence issue” to a subjective marker of affective polarization, contributing to the current evidence of rising polarization in Spain. The empirical evidence highlights a clear regression from the convergence observed during the 2012-2016 crisis to a polarized logic in 2025, where *confirmation bias* drives the perceptions of the electorate. Government supporters are immunized against recent scandals while these mobilize the opposition. This divergence suggests that voters now inhabit parallel realities where the severity of institutional misconduct is determined not by objective facts but by partisan loyalty. Since high levels of affective polarization are detrimental to social cohesion, decreasing the generalized trust required for democratic institutions to function¹⁶, this dynamic represents a clear danger for the Spanish democratic system.

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¹⁶ Mariano Torcal, Zoe A. Thomson, Social trust and affective polarization in Spain (2014–19), *Electoral Studies*, 2023 (81), 102582.



Alignment or Isolation – unfulfilled ambitions to establish a conservative left party group in the European Parliament

Tomáš Strážay

Main thesis

1. The 2024 elections to the European Parliament (EP) were expected to mark the beginning of a new political grouping encompassing parties combining left-wing ideology with a conservative and national agenda.
2. This combination of left-wing political stances, nationalism and social conservatism often mixed with authoritarian tendencies, attracted not only former leftist parties from the so-called new member states of Central Eastern Europe, but also supporters in countries such as Germany and Greece.
3. However, the ambition to create a new conservative left party group in the EP have remained unfulfilled. The number of eligible MEPs who would be willing to support such a group is low, as is the number of represented EU member states.

Introduction

While the left has traditionally been liberal or progressive, targeting the working class, a new phenomenon has recently emerged. As Michael C. Behrent argues in his article ‘Ordinary People’, people are not only concerned about economic forces that threaten their way of life, such as globalization, deindustrialization and automation, but also about ideologies originating from universities and urban centers that label their beliefs as outdated and even abhorrent. Consequently, many non-elites have moved from the left to the right, particularly towards far-right parties that have flourished in many countries over the past decade. In these circumstances, an unusual political stance has emerged by default: a conservative left.¹⁷ In short, as Eric Kaufmann suggests, this belief system combines conservative views on cultural issues such as national identity and immigration with left-wing views on economic issues such as public services.¹⁸

The conservative left aims to bring the nation to the centre of politics. It accuses other left-wing parties, including both social democratic and more radical ones, of abandoning the working class and of becoming too liberal and elitist. It is dismissive of the ‘lifestyle left’, which is embraced by the urban, educated classes who dominate academia, the media and culture more broadly. The conservative left also denounce ‘wokeness’ and ‘cancel culture’ as intolerant and out of touch with ordinary people’s concerns. Furthermore, it rejects multiculturalism, claiming that assimilating racial and religious minorities into a majoritarian

¹⁷ Michael C. Behrent, The Rise of the Conservative Left, *Discourse* 9.10. 2024 <https://www.discoursemagazine.com/p/the-rise-of-the-conservative-left>.

¹⁸ Eric Kaufman, The Rebirth of the Left-Conservative Tradition, *Tablet Magazine*, 16.06. 2020, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/rebirth-left-conservative-tradition>.

society is the best way to ensure social cohesion. Migration is perceived as a threat to societies and economies rather than a benefit to the future development of states.

The EU and its institutions are often criticized by the conservative left for their bureaucracy and the perceived illegitimacy of their decision-making processes. Conversely, the importance of national governments and parliaments is emphasized by these political forces. The conservative left also defends European heavy industry which depends on traditional fuels. In consequence, it expresses a critical approach towards the Green Deal. In general, it opposes the support for environmentalism and renewable energies, claiming that energy should be affordable for ordinary people.

Conservative left parties do not hide their authoritarian tendencies. They consider authoritarian/totalitarian regimes across the world, including Russia or China, as sources of inspiration rather than as threats, competitors or systemic rivals of the EU. If circumstances permit and they win elections like in Slovakia, most probably they will incorporate several elements characteristic of authoritarian regimes into their own political systems, including the concentration of power and a reductionist perception of (political) human rights.

Conservative left's foreign policy – the example of BSW and SMER-SSD

The Alliance Sobra Wagenknecht (Bündnis Sobra Wagenknecht – BSW) and Direction – Slovak Social Democracy (SMER – Slovenská sociálna demokracia – SMER-SSD) of Prime Minister Robert Fico are the two conservative left parties with the highest number of MEPs in the European Parliament. Despite their different lengths of existence, both parties have played important roles in their respective countries' domestic politics. SMER, in particular, has an impressive track record in government, having transitioned from European-style social democracy to the conservative left. SMER has ruled Slovakia in coalition since 2023, following three terms in the past (2006-2010, 2012-2016 and 2016-2018).

BSW was established by the fraction of Die Linke (Left) and is particularly popular in former East Germany (supported currently in the polls by around 7-10% of all voters in the region), where in certain states it may tip the balance.

While economic and social issues are at the center of both parties' attention, foreign policy is also important. In many ways, their foreign policy priorities represent those of other conservative left parties, such as Enough! (Stačilo!) in the Czech Republic, Voice (Hlas) in Slovakia, the Communist Party of Greece (KKE), and the Course of Freedom Party (Plefsi Eleftherias) in Greece. Today the conservative left parties enjoy the support of almost 5% to above 25% of voters in the above-mentioned countries. They are the most popular in Slovakia (in total around 25%) and Greece (almost 17%).

Regarding geopolitics, both parties oppose providing military support to Ukraine and generally sympathize with Vladimir Putin's policies. While calling for peace, they condemn the West's "war on Russia."¹⁹ Both parties reject the idea of labeling Russia as a threat. They also acknowledge the changing world order and note that new non-Western powers are gaining

¹⁹ Unser Land verdient mehr!, *Bündnis Sobra Wagenknecht manifesto*, 2025, <https://bsw-vg.de/wp-content/themes/bsw/assets/downloads/BSW%20Wahlprogramm%202025.pdf>;
Návrat suverenity do slovenskej zahraničnej politiky! Návrat dôstojnosti do života ľudí!, *SMER-SSD manifesto*, 2023, <https://www.strana-smer.sk/aktuality/blogy/post/volby-2023>.

influence. They use this to legitimize their peace policy oriented towards all four corners of the world.

Both BSW and SMER question the effectiveness of the EU-level sanctions against Russia. They also emphasize the need for “cheap” Russian energy to run local industry. Both parties disagree with the idea that Russia’s aggression was unprovoked, while stressing the problematic nature of NATO’s eastward enlargement. They also argue that Russia has always shaped European security and should play an important role in any future European security architecture.

Though both parties generally support Ukraine’s accession to the EU if it meets the necessary criteria, they are united in their opposition to Ukraine’s possible NATO membership. They would also oppose the deployment of German and Slovak troops to Ukrainian territory as part of future security guarantees. The statements to stop supporting Ukraine are merely being used to win over voters, though their target groups are somewhat different. BSW seeks the support of voters known as *Russlanddeutsche* (Germans of Russian descent), while SMER aims to appeal to pro-Russian voters with a romantic view of Russia as a protector of Slavic nations and their cultures.

Reasons for failure at the EU level

Despite certain obvious similarities between the conservative left parties, they have failed to create their own political group in the European Parliament (EP). This failure considerably undermines their ability to influence the EU’s agenda and increase their popularity at the national level.

Indeed, political groups in the EP have certain advantages. They play an important role in setting the Parliament’s agenda and are given more time to speak during debates. They also have more office space, staff and funds. Additionally, they decide how parliamentary committees and delegations are set up. Currently, there are eight political groups in the EP, organized by political affiliation from far left to far right, not nationality. In addition to these groups, there are still 32 MEPs who are not affiliated with any existing political groups.²⁰ To form a political group in the EU, a political party must secure the support of at least 23 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). Additionally, these MEPs must represent at least one-quarter of the member states (currently seven). While members may not belong to more than one political group, political groups can be formed at any time during the parliamentary term.

Before the 2024 EP elections, BSW representatives clearly wanted to create a new political group in the European Parliament. Joining this new political group was considered an option for unaffiliated members from other member states, as well as for those whose membership in an existing political group was in jeopardy. The former refers to the Italian Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S) and the Czech Stačilo! Movement, and the latter refers to the SMER-SSD party. Although M5S had initial discussions with the BSW, the party decided against closer cooperation and chose to join the Left group in the EP. Stačilo! and SMER-SSD confirmed their negotiations with the BSW regarding the formation of a new political group. However, in September 2024, BSW’s parliamentary leader, Fabio De Masi, declared that “the conditions

for forming a parliamentary group do not currently exist, so this debate comes too soon.”²¹ At that time, one of the obstacles might have been SMER-SSD’s affiliation with the Socialists and Democrats group, even though the party’s membership had been suspended. Another reason might have been the BSW’s weak performance in the elections. Out of the 96 MEPs assigned to Germany, the BSW only gained five, receiving six percent of the total vote.²²

As of today, the status quo regarding the new left-conservative group in the European Parliament remains unchanged. SMER-SSD was expelled from the Party of European Socialists in October 2024, leaving its five MEPs unattached to any existing political group. Stačilo! lost the September 2025 parliamentary elections in Czechia but still has two MEPs. However, with only 13 MEPs from three countries, the EP requirements cannot be met. Looking at the group of unattached MEPs, some potential candidates from the remaining 19 MEPs might emerge. The Voice (HLAS) party is somehow still associated with the Socialists and Democrats (with suspended status), but its sole MEP may be eligible to join the new party group. Two MEPs from the Communist Party of Greece and one MEP from Plefsi Eleftherias may also be willing to join. Overall, support for the new group among MEPs will be below the threshold, and there are almost no other potential supporters, as the vast majority of the remaining non-attached MEPs represent the far right of the political spectrum. The enhancement of cooperation between BSW, SMER, Hlas, Stačilo!, PE and KKE with certain far-left parties from the political group of The Left in the European Parliament constitutes the only chance for the establishment of the new conservative left group in the EP. However, this scenario is highly unlikely exactly due to the strong conservatism and nationalism of the above-mentioned parties.

Prospects for the future

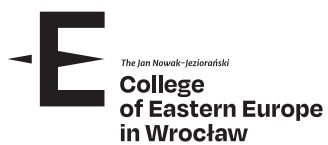
It is rather unrealistic to expect a new conservative-left party group to be established in the European Parliament in the current electoral cycle. The number of eligible MEPs who would be willing to support such a group is low, as is the number of represented EU member states. It is also unlikely that any party from the existing party groups would join the newly created group more than a year and a half after the EP elections. Therefore, the BSW, SMER, as well as Stačilo!, Hlas, KKE and PE, basically have only two options: to remain unaffiliated or to join an existing party group. The first option carries the risk of limited impact on the work of the European Parliament, while the second option may force the parties to deviate from their original plans and compromise with the other parties in the group. It would particularly make sense for SMER-SSD to join the Patriots for Europe group, as it aligns with the national populist viewpoint of the former liberal Andrej Babiš (the prime minister of Czechia) and former conservative Victor Orbán (the prime minister of Hungary), who are prominent members of this far-right group. However, due to the absence of internal consensus on this issue, SMER declined the option, and Robert Fico postponed any decision until 2026. His dreams of establishing a party group of “leftist” conservative-national parties that declare themselves as “friends of peace” will therefore remain only on paper at this time.²³

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21 Nick Alipour, Wagenknecht party and Fico’s Smer tease alliance, but ‘too soon’ for new EP group, *Euractiv*, 12.09. 2024, <https://www.euractiv.com/news/wagenknecht-party-and-ficos-smer-tease-alliance-but-too-soon-for-new-ep-group/>

22 Thomas Escritt, BSW: Germany’s new leftist party and AfD rival makes strides in EU election, *Reuters*, 10.06.2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/lower-taxes-higher-pensions-new-leftist-party-wins-over-germanys-disaffected-2024-06-10/>

23 Strana Smer-SD nepôjde do frakcie, plánuje iné kroky, *aktuality.sk*, 17.11.2025, <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/DRIQ7U4/robert-fico-zvazuje-vytvorenie-novej-europarlamentnej-frakcie-naznacil-spolupracu-s-lavicovymi-lidrami-v-eu/>



December 2025

Edited by Adam Balcer
Proofreading: Niall Gray

ISBN 978-83-7893-400-4

DTP: Dolasu



**Co-funded by
the European Union**