



# The Transnational Networks of the European Radical Populist Right and the Beacon of Hungarian Illiberal Democracy

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## Abstract

*Radical right parties in Europe have been in negotiations since 2018 in order to form a single, unified group in the European Parliament. Today, there are two competing caucuses: one, which is considered the “extreme right” by European standards; and another, which is a collection of far-right, Euroskeptical parties. A unified caucus would challenge the leadership of mainstream conservatives and Christian Democrats in the Parliament and be a show of strength by the radical right. For those who are at the origin of this attempt, namely Marine Le Pen from the French National Rally and Matteo Salvini, leader of the Italian Lega, the goal is also to mainstream their ideology by reaching an alliance with the Hungarian Fidesz party and the Polish Law and Justice Party. Both have become the beacons of illiberal democracy and role models for Western parties that used to be labeled “extreme right” and in need of a break from their past. However, tactical as well as ideological issues have, so far, prevented this unification of the radical right from becoming a reality.*

Keywords: Illiberal Democracy, Extreme Right, Radical Right, European Parliament, Law and Justice Party, Rassemblement National, Lega con Salvini

## The current balance of power within the radical right in the European Parliament

There are many political parties within the European Union that can claim the mantle of “populist” in the sense of the definition used by Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. Almost as many can rightly be classified as belonging to the “radical right” and even to the “extreme right.”<sup>1</sup> I focus in this article on the current state of international cooperation between radical-right parties and the competition that has arisen between the European Parliament political groups Identity and Democracy (ID) and the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR).

I also analyze the attempts, so far unsuccessful, to create within the European Parliament a common group, which would be slightly smaller (in terms of number of seats) than that of the European People’s Party (EPP). The latter group traditionally brings together conservatives and Christian Democrats. It was the EPP that Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán chose to leave on March 18, 2021. This project appeals to the radical right (notably the Lega con Salvini [League with Salvini, hereafter Lega] in Italy and the Rassemblement National [National Rally, hereafter RN] in France), who seek to shed their image of being extreme-right parties, which handicaps their electoral competitiveness. Alongside Fidesz, the Polish conservatives of the ruling Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice, hereafter PiS) also support this project.

There are currently seven political groups in the European Parliament, plus one consisting of non-attached Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). The Parliament’s rules of procedure stipulate that a minimum of 23 members is necessary to form a political group, and that it must include MEPs representing at least a quarter of the 27 member states.<sup>2</sup> In the current legislature (2019–2024), the EPP has 177 (25.1%) of the chamber’s 705 elected members, thus overtaking the Social Democrats (145, or 20.5%) and the Liberals (102, or 14.5%).

The groups to the right of the EPP are Identity and Democracy,<sup>3</sup> chaired by an elected member of the Lega (61, or 8.7%), and the ECR (64, or 9.1%),<sup>4</sup> chaired by one of the ideologues of the PiS, the political philosopher Ryszard Legutko. Legutko shares this office with former Italian Minister for South and Territorial Cohesion Raffaele Fitto, elected from Fratelli d’Italia (Brothers of Italy), a formation that is both post-Fascist (that is, which follows in the footsteps of the former Alleanza Nazionale [National Alliance] of Gianfranco Fini, who dropped all references to Fascism in 1995) and national-conservative (in the sense of being nationalist politically and conservative on moral issues).

The non-registered alliance is a heterogeneous group, which includes: the 12 elected members of Fidesz; a former Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany, hereafter AfD) elected official; one MEP from Hungary’s Jobbik Magyarorszáért Mozgalom (Movement for a Better Hungary, hereafter Jobbik), which is now part of the coalition opposing Orbán; two members of the Greek Χρυσή Αυγή (Golden Dawn), whom neither ID nor ECR want to see join them because of their neo-Nazi ideology; and four former RN deputies, who in 2022 defected to Reconquête! (Reconquest!), the party created in January 2022 by far-right French pundit-turned-presidential-candidate Éric Zemmour. The defection of these French MEPs who left far-right candidate Marine Le Pen in the middle of her campaign for the presidential elections of April 2022 has reversed the balance of power which, at the start of their terms, had given Identity and Democracy a one-seat advantage over the ECR.

## The search for European alliances and the question of ideological and tactical proximity

The question of power relations and alliances in the European Parliament is not limited to the seating arrangements among those with a sense of ideological affinity for one another. There

1 In the European context, the label “extreme right” usually means the party is associated with Fascism; National-Socialism or an authoritarian right-wing movement from the 1930s–1940s, either because of its ideological roots or because of its present-day ideology.

2 This means that, after the 2019 election, when the UK was still in the EU, it needed group members from seven countries.

3 The member parties of the group are the Italian Lega, the French RN, the Austrian Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (Freedom Party of Austria), the Belgian Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest), the Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany), the Estonian Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond (Conservative People’s Party of Estonia), the Czech SPD, the Dutch Partij voor de Vrijheid (Party for Freedom), the Danish Dansk Folkeparti (Danish People’s Party), and the Perussuomalaiset (Finns Party). See: <https://fridgroup.eu/>.

4 Among the member formations of the group that are comparable to the radical populist right are the Spaniards of Vox, the Brothers of Italy, the Sverigedemokraterna (Swedish Democrats), and the PiS.

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are two main issues in the functioning of a political alliance: that of the allocation of material resources (offices, staff, funding), and that of political visibility (speaking time in the hemicycle, committee memberships). These explain why there is such a push to form an alliance and calls to unify all the radical populist right-wing MEPs under a common group. This creates a tactical dimension in European Parliament politics, which sometimes comes to thwart the notion of ideological proximity.

In the European Parliament, members do not sit according to their nationality, but are encouraged to join a political group, which is similar to a congressional caucus in the United States. The European political project tends to go beyond the nation-state, moving towards a form of international federalism, or even supra-nationality. This is why Parliament recognizes and funds transnational political parties, which are separate entities from parliamentary groups. They can create think tanks, which also receive separate funding. The European institutions treat them as complementary entities with an important role to play in the process of strengthening democracy within the EU.

Identity and Democracy is a political party, in addition to being a parliamentary group. As such, it can admit to its membership parties that have no elected members in Parliament, such as the Bulgarians of Движение Воля (Volya Movement), the Portuguese of Chega! (Enough!), the Poles of the Kongres Nowej Prawicy (Congress of the New Right), and the Slovaks of Sme Rodina (We are a family), who are represented in their national parliaments and aspire to be also present in Brussels. The ECR party, whose platform is built on Euroscepticism and the return to a Europe of nations founded on Christian values, is thus much broader than the parliamentary group of the same name. It attracts several constituencies, which straddle the line between conservative nationalism and the radical right (the Nacionālā Apvienība [National Alliance] in Latvia; or the Hrast – Pokret za uspješnu Hrvatsku [Hrast-Movement for Successful Croatia], stemming from the Right Party, a continuation of the Ustashi lineage).<sup>5</sup>

The larger a group is, the better it is for all parties affiliated with it. This is why the question of transnational networks on the radical right is not only a question of ideology: there is so much money and political visibility at stake that all the far-right parties sitting in the European Parliament may be tempted to overcome their disagreements with possible partners in order to form a group.

Finally, the symbolic dimension of the radical populist right's leadership also matters. It was first held by the Movimento Sociale Italiano (Italian Social Movement, which is neo-Fascist) following the first elections to the European Parliament in 1979. Then France's far-right Front National (National Front) took its place in the Parliament and the leadership fell to its party boss, Jean-Marie Le Pen. He lasted in this role from 1984 until at least 2011,<sup>6</sup> due both to his charisma and his party's electoral results. After him and to this day, Matteo Salvini and Marine Le Pen (daughter of Jean-Marie) have shared this more-or-less undisputed leadership. The former represents a government party accepted as a coalition partner by the Italian right, while the latter remains hostile to the unification of the various right-wing forces (that is, between the RN, Reconquest!, and the right wing of the mainstream conservatives of Les Républicains [The Republicans]). However, Marine Le Pen does support the process of ideological reorganization within her own party, which leads her to seek, for domestic political purposes, the broadest possible alliances at the international level in order to make voters forget that RN is first and foremost an anti-immigration, nativist party.

Only by considering all these factors can we understand the objectives of those who seek the unity of all the radical-right populists at the European level, as well as the difficulties they encounter in achieving this and the pivotal role played by Fidesz and Viktor Orbán, and, to a lesser degree, the Polish PiS, in seeking to build this unity.

### **Hungarian and Polish arbiters**

What role can Fidesz and PiS play in building a unified network of European radical-right populists? What would motivate them to join it, considering that such alliances had no influence on the choice of Hungarian voters during their national elections in April 2022, and that Polish voters, who will elect their Parliament in 2023, certainly do not care any more than the Hungarians? Moreover, these alliances bear a reputational risk by associating themselves with parties often

<sup>5</sup> Website of the European Conservatives and Reformists, <https://ecrgroup.eu/ecr>.

<sup>6</sup> Jean-Marie Le Pen left the presidency of the National Front in January 2011. He remained an MEP until 2019.

perceived as far-right, with the pejorative connotation that this term carries, both in Western Europe and in the bodies of the European Union.

Fidesz left the EPP of its own accord, but was left with little choice after the latter altered its statutes to exclude it. Fidesz represents a country which, since September 12, 2018, has been the subject of a European Parliament resolution asking the Council to rule on the existence of a clear risk of a serious breach by Hungary of the fundamental values of the European Treaty. This is the implementation of the procedure provided for in Article 7 of the Treaty of Rome, which may entail the suspension of some of the rights deriving from the application of the treaties to the member state in question.

The PiS is in a different situation. It is in power in a country that is even more at odds with Brussels, since Article 7 was used for the first time against Poland on December 20, 2017, at the behest of the European Commission.<sup>7</sup> It is therefore possible that the two parties will consider allying themselves with movements considered far-right, increasingly so if they were to be confined to the opposition in their respective countries. It may seem like a low-cost move. Nevertheless, PiS has more to lose than does Fidesz. The former is in fact perfectly integrated into the fraction of European Reformists and Conservatives which, until Brexit, included the British Conservatives, and now has member parties endowed with a respectable reputation and real weight on the political spectrum, such as the Czech *Občanská demokratická strana* (Civic Democratic Party) (which returned to power in November 2021) or the *Nieuw Vlaamse Alliantie* (New Flemish Alliance) (which holds the post of minister-president of the province of Belgian Flanders).

On July 2, 2021, Marine Le Pen announced that she had signed a joint declaration on the future of the European Union with Matteo Salvini; Viktor Orbán; Jaroslaw Kaczyński; the Spanish leader of the conservative populist party Vox, Santiago Abascal; and the rising star of the Italian right, Georgia Meloni; along with 10 other European political parties.<sup>8</sup> This marks a step forward in the formation of a common ideological platform. If it leads to the creation of a common group in the European Parliament, it will constitute an important political event and an unprecedented realignment of the European right. However, this common group has not yet been formalized. The question is: why?

One of the reasons is that Orbán's ideological roots, like those of Kaczyński, lie in a tradition that is not of the extreme right. The Hungarian prime minister is a national-conservative whose party claims to belong to an "authentic" Christian-democratic tradition—that is, not to that of the German *Christlich Demokratische Union* (Christian Democratic Union), long led by Chancellor Angela Merkel, but to a Christian conservatism that is at the same time sovereigntist, morally conservative (if not faithful in all respects to the Social Doctrines of the Catholic Church), insists on the Christian roots of Western civilization, and maintaining, against all odds, the formal framework of representative democracy. Fidesz is a party that developed during the period from 2002–2010 when Orbán was in opposition from the center-right and won the majority thanks to the efforts of "civic circles," a grassroots movement of civil society representing the interests of the nationalist middle class that had returned to traditional religious values.<sup>9</sup>

This is a radically different approach from that of the Italian Lega and the French RN, and it reduces the chances for mutual understanding, except on a few general points such as the rejection of a multicultural society, the promotion of national sovereignty, and their preference for a regime in which executive power is "vertical," the independence of the judiciary is infringed upon, countervailing forces are weak and seen as enemies, and the system of checks and balances is despised as a "proof" of Western "weakness."

Both PiS and Fidesz want to replace the old elites, support the revival of nationalism, promote the role of religion (mainly Catholicism, although there also exists an arch-conservative wing of the Calvinist Reformed Church of Hungary) and their opposition to everything that constitutes

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<sup>7</sup> The sanction mechanism can go as far as suspending the right to vote of the country concerned, but not as far as exclusion. The suspension does not prevent European decisions from continuing to apply to the member state, such that it does not produce the same effects as a voluntary exit from the European Union. For a precise explanation of the procedure for triggering Article 7, see: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/fr/headlines/eu-affairs/20180222STO298434/etat-de-droit-comment-fonctionne-article-7-infographic>.

<sup>8</sup> See the RN website: <https://rassemblementnational.fr/communiqués/lerassemblement-des-patriotes-europeens-est-lance/>.

<sup>9</sup> See Béla Greskovits, "Rebuilding the Hungarian Right through Conquering Civil Society: The Civic Circles Movement," *East European Politics* 36, no. 2 (January 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2020.1718657>.

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a mockery of Western European values—and therefore a “betrayal” of the “national soul.” This can only be understood through the desire to erase the legacy of the Communist period through the adoption of national-conservative ideologies drawing on movements of the interwar period: the authoritarian regime of Hungarian Regent Miklós Horthy and the Polish statesman Roman Dmowski’s Stronnictwo Narodowo-Demokratyczne (National Democratic Party).<sup>10</sup>

This barrier to mutual understanding between Central European parties and their French and Italian counterparts has been aggravated by the practical absence of French or Italian translations of the works of both Polish and Hungarian ideologues from the national-conservative movements. It was only in 2020 that a French neoconservative theoretical journal with limited circulation, *Krisis*, published the text written by Viktor Orbán in 2018 under the title: “What Is Illiberal Democracy?”<sup>11</sup> While French New Right philosopher Alain de Benoist is regularly interviewed in the Hungarian press,<sup>12</sup> very few Hungarian conservative intellectuals have reached a French audience, apart from the late philosopher Thomas Molnar (Hungarian: Molnár Tamás, 1921–2010), who was familiar with the counterrevolutionaries of the 19th century, with Thomism, and with the French conservative philosopher Charles Maurras as well as with the New Right. Together with the former Fidesz politician and member of the European Parliament, György Schöpflin, who died in 2021, Molnar is also one of the few to have published in the Anglo-Saxon world (in the United States for the former, in Great Britain for the latter).<sup>13</sup>

Regarding Poland’s PiS, French-speaking audiences are only familiar with the work of one of its leading intellectuals, Ryszard Legutko, titled *The Demon in Democracy: Totalitarian Temptations in Free Societies*, published in 2016.<sup>14</sup> On a more general level, familiarity with Hungary has recently been enriched by the works of Catherine Horel,<sup>15</sup> and by familiarity with the intellectual landscape of Central Europe through the monumental and indispensable dictionary co-edited by Joanna Nowicki and Chantal Delsol.<sup>16</sup>

This recent revival of interest in Central Europe, as well as in the theoretical foundations of illiberal democracy, is also expressed by the focus on these topics in the French national-conservative monthly periodical *L’Incorrect*,<sup>17</sup> the neoconservative monthly *Éléments*,<sup>18</sup> and a specialized online publication called the “Visegrad Post,”<sup>19</sup> founded by the Franco-Hungarian journalist François Lavallou (Hungarian name: Almásy Ferenc)<sup>20</sup> in partnership with the Hungarian daily *Magyar Nemzet*, the Polish weekly *Do Rzeczy*, and the French identitarian web-TV channel TV Libertés. Some French people have also made known the Hungarian radical-right movement surrounding

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10 On the ideological roots of PiS, see Adam Folvarčny and Lubomir Kopeček: “Which Conservatism? The Identity of the Polish Law and Justice Party,” *Politics in Central Europe* 16 (2020–21): 159–188, <https://doi.org/10.2478/pce-2020-0008>.

11 See *Krisis* vol. 50, September 2020. *Krisis* is a journal founded in 1988 by Alain de Benoist to open a dialog with intellectuals not affiliated with the New Right but open to discussion on the issues that are important to this movement.

12 In 2018, he was published in *Mandiner* ([https://mandiner.hu/cikk/20181214\\_alain\\_de\\_benoist\\_interju](https://mandiner.hu/cikk/20181214_alain_de_benoist_interju)) and several times in the now defunct *Magyar Idők* (<https://www.magyaridok.hu/belfold/orban-viktor-bebizonyitotta-hogy-mindenekelot-nepe-sorsaval-torodik-2418268/>). His work is also known in the small Hungarian perennialist circles that publish the *Pannon Front* and *Magyar Híperjón* reviews. Several of his works have been translated by the Europa Authentica publishing house in Budapest.

13 The lack of knowledge about Hungarian conservatives also affects the historiography of the fascist movements of the 1930s and ’40s. In Latin countries, the Romanian Iron Guard and its mysticism, with the “martyr” figures of Codreanu, Mota, and Marin, has aroused much more interest than the Hungarian Arrow Cross Party, whose leader, Ferenc Szálasi had his book, *Great Space, Vital Space, Guiding People*, published in December 2017 by Ars Magna Publishing of the French nationalist-revolutionary activist Christian Bouchet. See: [https://www.editions-ars-magna.com/index.php?route=product/product&product\\_id=150](https://www.editions-ars-magna.com/index.php?route=product/product&product_id=150).

14 See: *The Demon in Democracy: Totalitarian Temptations in Free Societies* (New York: Encounter Books, 2016), available in French translation as *Le Diable dans la Démocratie: Tentations Totalitaires au Cœur des Sociétés Libres* (Paris: Éditions de l’Artilleur, 2021).

15 In particular, her biography: Le Régent Horthy (Perrin, 2014) and her *Histoire de la nation Hongroise: Des premiers Magyars à Viktor Orbán* (Paris: Éditions Tallandier, 2021).

16 Joanna Nowicki and Chantal Delsol, *La Vie de l’esprit en Europe centrale et orientale depuis 1945* (Éditions Cerf, 2021).

17 See: <https://lincorrect.org/le-nouveau-proces-de-lest-la-question-hongroise-lincorrect/>.

18 See: Alain de Benoist, “La démocratie illibérale et ses ennemis,” *Éléments* no. 174, October 2018.

19 See: <https://visegradpost.com/fr/>.

20 Ferenc Almásy is a regular speaker at the colloquiums of the Iliade Institute, which belongs to the Identitarian movement and forms part of the intellectual continuity of Dominique Venner (1935–2013).

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the neofascist Jobbik party since the 2010s, such as the former Alsatian identity activist Nicolas de Lamberterie, founder of the French branch of the Hatvannégy Vármegye Ifjúsági Mozgalom (Sixty-Four Counties Youth Movement), who later joined the National Rally.<sup>21</sup>

Within conservative intellectual circles, both American and Western European, which are present in Budapest and working in connection with Fidesz, one may notice the involvement of Erick Tegnér, who is a close friend of Marion Maréchal (granddaughter of Jean-Marie Le Pen and niece of Marine Le Pen) and supporter of Éric Zemmour, at the Danube Institute in the capacity of Visiting Fellow.<sup>22</sup> Zemmour is, among other things, the founder of the online media *Livre Noir*, which presents Hungarian news<sup>23</sup> and covers the Russian-Ukrainian war from an angle that is very favorable to Russia.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, since the publication of the presidential candidates' tax returns prior to the elections set for May 10 and 24, it has been known that the Hungarian bank MKB made €10.6 million in personal loans over 16 months directly made out to Marine Le Pen for her campaign.<sup>25</sup> Most of the bank's capital is held by a childhood friend of the Hungarian Prime Minister, Lőrinc Mészáros, allied with the entrepreneur Lászlo Szijj, who is also close to Orbán.

### Various concurrent initiatives

With these foundations laid, the next step is to question what are the initiatives involving Fidesz and/or PiS that tend to establish relations with national-populist or far-right parties, within the above-described framework of building an alliance at the European Union level? Originally, the driving tandem of the alliance was composed of Marine Le Pen and Matteo Salvini, who, while now deputy prime minister of Italy, at that time was the minister of the interior.

On October 8, 2018, they met in Rome to create a joint platform for the European elections in May 2019. Salvini, who has already shown his determination to take the lead on the union of "sovereignists," charts a tortuous course. He has indeed previously outlined a rapprochement with Orbán, whom he met on August 28, 2018, in Milan, again in the run-up to the European elections. Their common enemy has since been French President Emmanuel Macron, labeled the "leader of the pro-migrant parties" in Europe.<sup>26</sup> The leader of the Lega proceeded by reuniting his own European alliance in Milan, on April 8, 2019, dubbed the Europe of Common Sense, bringing together representatives of the AfD, the Perussomalaist (Finns Party), and the Dansk Folkeparti (Danish People's Party), with the ambitious goal of moving towards a "new European dream" built on identity.<sup>27</sup> He appealed to Viktor Orbán, who was "unavailable" to participate in this event, to join his allies, the Dutch Partij voor de Vrijheid (Party for Freedom) of Geert Wilders but without the nostalgists, the "extremists," the veterans.<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, on August 28, 2018, Salvini and Orbán met in Italy in another setting and seemed to agree on the fight against immigration, the convergence of their political action, and their describing the French president as the loathed representative of the Europeanists and liberal

<sup>21</sup> Abel Mestre and Caroline Monnot, "Le FN et les radicaux: 'Je l'aime, moi non plus,'" *Le Monde*, December 19, 2014, [https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2014/12/19/le-fn-et-les-radicaux-je-l-aime-moi-non-plus\\_5992859\\_823448.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2014/12/19/le-fn-et-les-radicaux-je-l-aime-moi-non-plus_5992859_823448.html).

<sup>22</sup> See the author's profile on the Danube Institute website: <https://danubeinstitute.hu/en/authors/tegnér-erik>. Erick Tegnér, former head of the young activists of The Republicans, announces that he wants to publish a book about Hungary as well as to produce a documentary about the country.

<sup>23</sup> Julien Tellier, "Victor Orbán largement vainqueur aux dernières élections législatives," *Livre Noir*, April 4, 2022, <https://livre-noir.fr/viktor-orban-largement-vainqueur-aux-dernieres-elections-legislatives/>.

<sup>24</sup> Reportages de guerre: Le nouveau pôle international de Livre Noir, <https://livre-noir.fr/reporter-de-guerre/>.

<sup>25</sup> Haute Autorité pour la transparence de la vie publique, "Déclaration de situation patrimoniale en tant que candidate à l'élection présidentielle," Marion (ditte Marine) Le Pen, February 16, 2022, <https://www.hatvnp.fr/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/DSP-Le-Pen.pdf>.

<sup>26</sup> "Salvini: Verso l'Europa del Buon Senso, i Nostalgici Stanno a Bruxelles," *Affaritaliani.it*, April 8, 2019, <https://www.affaritaliani.it/milano/salvini-verso-l-europa-del-buon-senso-i-nostalgici-stanno-a-bruxelles-598132.html>.

<sup>27</sup> "Sovranisti, Salvini: Puntiamo a Essere il Primo Gruppo nel Parlamento Europeo. Orbán Venga Con Noi," *la Repubblica*, April 8, 2019, [https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2019/04/08/news/sovrnanisti\\_matteo\\_salvini\\_parlamento\\_europeo-223565543/](https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2019/04/08/news/sovrnanisti_matteo_salvini_parlamento_europeo-223565543/).

<sup>28</sup> "Sovranisti, Salvini: Puntiamo a Essere il Primo Gruppo nel Parlamento Europeo. Orbán Venga Con Noi," *la Repubblica*, April 8, 2019, [https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2019/04/08/news/sovrnanisti\\_matteo\\_salvini\\_parlamento\\_europeo-223565543/](https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2019/04/08/news/sovrnanisti_matteo_salvini_parlamento_europeo-223565543/).

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multiculturalism.<sup>29</sup> In April 2019, Salvini traveled to the Serbian-Hungarian border with Orbán to inspect the border fence erected by Hungary during the 2015 migration crisis. At that time, according to the interview Orbán gave to the Roman newspaper *La Stampa*, he remained in the EPP and urged it to consider the specific needs of the conservatives of Central Europe, yet he had not yet decided upon his European strategy—whether to remain in the EPP or leave it. On May 18, Salvini again gathered in Milan alongside representatives of 12 European national-populist groups, including Marine Le Pen; the Czech Tomio Okamura, leader of the Svoboda a přímá demokracie (Freedom and Direct Democracy); the Slovak Boris Kollár of We are a Family;<sup>30</sup> and the Bulgarian Veselin Mareski, of the Volya Movement,<sup>31</sup> who were on stage to represent Central and Eastern Europe. However, the Polish PiS and the Sverigedemokraterna (Sweden Democrats) refused to join the event because of the pro-Russian tropes of some of the represented parties: notably of the Lega, the RN, and the Austrian Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (Freedom Party of Austria, hereafter FPÖ)—which cancelled its attendance at the last minute because of the scandal arising from Russian sponsorship, which forced its leader, Vice Chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache of the FPÖ, to resign. Fidesz, though absent, remained on standby.<sup>32</sup>

The situation would change and become more complex after the May 2019 European elections and especially after the departure of the Hungarian members of the EPP. The change would take place in three stages. First, on July 2, 2021, a Declaration on the future of Europe<sup>33</sup> was signed, conceived as a response to the Conference on the Future of Europe, an exercise in consultation with the citizens of the 27 member states, the result of which were made public in spring 2022. The Declaration on the future of Europe, which has been endorsed by 16 political parties, including the PiS, Fidesz, the Estonian Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond (Conservative People's Party of Estonia), and the Lietuvos lenkų rinkimų akcija – Krikščioniškų šeimų sąjunga (Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania—Christian Families Alliance, similar to the PiS), is a classic sovereigntist statement.<sup>34</sup> It evokes “the freedom of nations and the traditions of the European peoples,” as well as the fact that nations “defend their sovereignty and territorial integrity.” It is concerned that “the work of European cooperation is running out of steam, as nations feel that they are slowly being stripped of their right to exercise their legitimate sovereign powers.” The signatories, therefore, call for “a profound reform” allowing nations to regain their power and to stop the drift towards a “European superstate.”

The influence of Fidesz and PiS on the drafting of the text can be seen in the paragraph that states, “The EU is increasingly becoming a tool of radical forces that would like to achieve a civilizational transformation and ultimately a nationless construction of Europe aiming at the creation of a European superstate, the destruction or annulment of European traditions, [and] the transformation of basic social institutions and moral principles.” Surprisingly, however, the PiS obtained an important concession in the text, with the affirmation that “the Atlantic alliance of the European Union with the North Atlantic Treaty, as well as the peace between the cooperating nations, is a great success for a large number of Europeans, giving them a permanent sense of security and creating optimal conditions for development.” At the time, the Rome summit appeared to be a major step towards the constitution of a single group of radical right-wingers, since it had brought the Lega and Brothers of Italy into the agreement, involved the Spanish Vox, and paved the way for relations with minor Lithuanian, Greek, and Romanian parties.

Nevertheless, another source of discord arose from the attitude of Fidesz, during the autumn of 2021, in the run-up to the French elections of 2022. On September 24, 2021, the pundit Éric Zemmour and Marion Maréchal participated in the 4th Summit on Demography in

<sup>29</sup> “Migrants: Orban Évoque Son ‘Héros’ Salvini et Fait de Macron Son Ennemi,” *Le Parisien*, by M.-W.L., <https://www.leparisien.fr/international/migrants-orban-evoque-son-heros-salvini-et-fait-de-macron-son-ennemi-28-08-2018-7868262.php>.

<sup>30</sup> This party did not win any seats in the European Parliament in 2019, but has 17 members in the national parliament. See: <https://hnutic-smrodina.sk/>.

<sup>31</sup> This Russophile Bulgarian nationalist party is against immigration and favors the dismissal of the political class, which is considered corrupt. Led by Veselin Mareski, nicknamed the “Bulgarian Trump,” the party has not won a single seat in the European Parliament and, as of 2021, none in the national Parliament. See: <http://volia.bg/>.

<sup>32</sup> Carlo de Nuzzo, “Les Mots du Duomo,” *Le Grand Continent*, <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2019/05/20/les-mots-du-duomo/>.

<sup>33</sup> Rassemblement National website: [https://rassemblementnational.fr/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/De%CC%81claration\\_sur\\_lavenir\\_de\\_leurope\\_MLP.pdf](https://rassemblementnational.fr/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/De%CC%81claration_sur_lavenir_de_leurope_MLP.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> For the list of signatories, see: <https://rassemblementnational.fr/communiqués/lerassemblement-des-patriotes-europeens-est-lance/>.

Europe, organized by the Hungarian Minister for Family Affairs, Katalin Novak,<sup>35</sup> who as a Francophone and Francophile in 2019 was made a Knight of the Legion of Honor (Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur). Former U.S. Vice President Mike Pence, the Serbian president, the Slovenian and Czech prime ministers, and the Serbian member of the troika in charge of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, all addressed the meeting. Zemmour, who was not yet a declared presidential candidate, and Marion Maréchal, who no longer held any elective office, met Orbán at the protocol level for a private discussion. Zemmour, a journalist and essayist signing autographs for his book, *La France n'a pas dit son dernier mot* ("France has not spoken its last word"), was moving faster and faster towards his eventual candidacy, which he announced on November 30.

Marine Le Pen had to react internationally to this competitor whom she had not foreseen. She therefore met the Hungarian prime minister in Budapest in his office at the Carmelite Monastery on October 26 and held an official press conference with him. The protocol of her visit greatly exceeded that planned for Zemmour. The head of the Hungarian government affirmed that he was "looking for partners to cooperate in this new era" and that the camp of Marine Le Pen was "unavoidable," while refraining from formally endorsing any candidate. According to him, "the decision rests with the French people."<sup>36</sup> A breakfast between Le Pen and Orbán during a meeting of the European radical right in Madrid on January 29, 2022 (that is, two weeks after Zemmour launched his nationalist-identitarian party, Reconquest!) confirmed that the Hungarian leader had definitively chosen with whom he intended to work on the regrouping of the European right. He sent a video message to supporters of the RN candidate during the meeting in Reims on February 5, despite the numerous defections of RN leaders to Zemmour: those of MEPs Jérôme Rivière (January 19), Gilbert Collard (January 22), Maxette Pirbakas (February 1), and Nicolas Bay (February 16), who now sit among the non-registered members.

Choosing Marine Le Pen over Éric Zemmour is not necessarily a demonstration of definitive commitment from Orbán, since no one knows how the Reconquest! deputies will act from now through the end of their terms. Ironically, it is Zemmour, a Conservative Jew, who is closer to Orbán's traditional Christian values, whereas the Catholic Le Pen has distanced herself from the religious aspect of politics and is very cautious not to take up the claims of traditionalist Catholic groups opposed to the rights of LGBTQI+ people, to abortion, or to medically-assisted procreation. Was it a tactical choice driven by the assumption that the RN would have the upper hand in the presidential election? No doubt. But this choice sends a clear signal of opposition to the mainstream European conservative right, since Zemmour's objective is not to oppose them head-on, but to unite them—from the Republicans to the RN through his own party—while modifying their ideological framework towards a form of identity-based and ethno-nationalist sovereignty, which is also rooted in the French plebiscitary tradition.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, one may ask whether in these complicated attempts to form a united front of the radical right, the attitude of the PiS is not more puzzling than that of Orbán. Several key pro-Russian figures, including Orbán, visited Warsaw on December 4, 2021, at a time when American intelligence already had fears of an impending Russian invasion of Ukraine. The protocol level of the trip was quite substantial, almost official, with a wreath-laying in front of the monument to the victims of the Katyn Massacre during World War II, another in front of the monument to the Jewish victims of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, and then a dinner held for Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and his Hungarian counterpart.<sup>37</sup> One can only be left perplexed by the attitude of the Polish government, even if, at the time of the invasion of Ukraine, Marine Le Pen denounced "the clear violation of international law," called for taking in Ukrainian refugees, and judged Russia's aggression to be "indefensible." To this day, and perhaps because of these contradictions, inconsistencies, and different or even opposing projects, the unification of the radical right has not yet been achieved. One cannot be sure that it will be done by the next European elections, scheduled for the end of May 2024.

<sup>35</sup> For the Summit's agenda, see: <https://budapestdemografiacsues.hu/en>.

<sup>36</sup> *France 24*, "En Hongrie, Marine Le Pen Fait Bloc avec Viktor Orban contre l'Union Européenne," October 26, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/fr/europe/20211026-en-hongrie-marine-le-pen-fait-bloc-avec-viktor-orban-contre-l-union-europ%C3%A9enn>.

<sup>37</sup> Jérôme Besnard, "Marine Le Pen à Varsovie," *L'Incorrect*, December 7, 2021, <https://lincorrect.org/marine-le-pen-a-varsovie-politique-lincorrect/>.