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# The European Radical Right in the Age of Trump 2.0

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## Introduction

Donald Trump's return to the White House in January 2025 seemed to herald a revolutionary new era that would reshape not only the United States but also European politics and culture.<sup>1</sup> The breathtaking speed and depth with which the second Trump presidency has changed U.S. domestic and foreign policy is reminiscent of former Chinese leader Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution and has caused frantic adaptation across the globe.<sup>2</sup> U.S. action in geopolitical theaters that are central to Europe's security and Washington's triggering of a global trade war are immensely consequential for Europe.

U.S. policy is revealing the ideological detail of the American radical right as it undergoes some solidification and builds an international network in which Europe plays a key role. Europe is high on the agenda of the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement.

Yet, however emboldened the European radical right may feel, and despite growing transatlantic linkages, events of the past year suggest that the continent's own dynamics and challenges remain the main drivers that shape Europe's political and policy choices. The European radical right has had some electoral successes but continues to struggle to turn that achievement into action, as it is divided in the European Union (EU) institutions and inconsistent on policy. The primary factor in the radical right's success is the failure of mainstream politics to find effective responses to political challenges.

In April 2024, Carnegie Europe published a report on the foreign policies of the fourteen most significant European radical-right parties and their impact on the EU.<sup>3</sup> Now, one year into the EU's 2024–2029 institutional term, this paper asks: With Trump in the White House, can the radical right—in the words of Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán—“conquer” Europe?<sup>4</sup>

In fact, the Trump effect on the radical right is more nuanced than is usually assumed. Signals of both empowerment and distance are visible. While the radical right's electorate is more drawn to Trump in his second term than in his first, most Europeans continue to be skeptical of him, making radical-right parties cautious in their embrace of Trumpism. After all, the Trump administration's outright anti-EU policies affect radical-right electorates, too.

The radical right is as consequential as centrist parties, leaders, and institutions allow it to be. Fears that the radical right with Trump's support will destroy the EU seem overblown in the short term. However, the right could well be capable of blocking and delaying reforms that are necessary to confront the EU's current and future challenges. Rather than conquering Europe, the radical right seems set on preventing the EU from becoming what it needs to become.

## Electoral and Governmental Performances

Radical-right parties have gained significant ground in various national elections across Europe, with their vote shares often exceeding 20 percent. Particularly remarkable and unprecedented in 2024–2025 were the emergence of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) as the second-largest party in the German Bundestag, the 142 seats obtained by Marine Le Pen's National Rally in the French National Assembly, and the victory of the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) in that country's parliamentary election.<sup>5</sup> More recently, the far-right Chega party achieved 22.8 percent of the vote in Portugal's May 2025 legislative election, tying for second place with the Socialists.<sup>6</sup>

Presidential elections in Romania and Poland pitted the liberal mayors of the capital cities against radical-right politicians. In Romania, the liberal Nicușor Dan prevailed over the far-right George Simion, while in Poland, the right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party's candidate, Karol Nawrocki, narrowly beat the center-right Rafał Trzaskowski, dealing a heavy blow to Prime Minister Donald Tusk's hope of overcoming the illiberal legacy of the previous PiS government. Meanwhile, the populist right-wing ANO party of Andrej Babiš, a staunch ally of Orbán, is on track to win the Czech parliamentary election set for October 2025.

Despite their electoral successes, however, radical-right parties are making only modest progress in gaining executive power at the national level. According to a quantitative analysis by the *Economist*, European radical-right parties since 2020 have received 24 percent of the vote in legislative elections and won 23 percent of parliamentary seats. But they account for only 14 percent of the seats held by parties in power.<sup>7</sup>



In the Netherlands, centrist parties agreed to form a short-lived coalition with Geert Wilders's Party for Freedom (PVV), albeit with a technocratic prime minister. As of this writing, radical-right parties are part of the government in five EU member states—Croatia, Finland, Hungary, Italy, and Slovakia—the same number as a year ago. The Sweden Democrats support the government in the country's parliament. Just two heads of government—Italy's Giorgia Meloni and Orbán—come from the radical right. Belgium's Prime Minister Bart De Wever, who hails from a party considered borderline between populist and radical right, heads a five-party coalition that keeps a firewall, or *cordon sanitaire*, around the far right.<sup>8</sup>

This difficulty of translating electoral success into governmental responsibility is partly due to a natural preference of most mainstream parties to enter into coalitions among themselves. In some EU countries, including France and Germany, where the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution designated the AfD a right-wing extremist organization, mainstream parties are strongly committed to a strict firewall to keep the radical right away from the levers of power. In other countries, the inclusion of radical-right parties in the government is no longer a taboo, but such coalitions are sometimes fragile and find it difficult to maintain their unity. Also, some radical-right leaders, who specialize in grievance politics and exploit anti-elite sentiments, struggle with the challenge of assuming governmental responsibility.

However, the problems experienced by radical-right parties in achieving executive power should not lead to complacency. Poor performance in government has not led to poor election results: If their electoral ascent continues, these parties' breakthrough to governmental power in more EU members is only a matter of time.

Overall, radical-right parties in Europe have toned down their hardline stance toward the EU in response to the political and economic fallout of Brexit. While remaining undeniably Euroskeptic, these parties have developed a vision of the EU built on sovereignty and strictly intergovernmental cooperation. Rather than advocate withdrawal from the union, many now call for changing it from within to make it a looser organization led by nations, inspired by their Christian roots and conservative values, and unhindered by supranational laws and mechanisms that can interfere in domestic politics. The speeches of Orbán and Meloni are littered with civilizational views of historic nations fighting against liberalism, immigration, and Brussels, which has “stolen the European dream,” to make Europe a place where “nations become great without losing their soul.”<sup>9</sup>

The subjugation of the judiciary to the executive is a key element of the radical right's vision, as evidenced by steps taken by Hungary and the former PiS government in Poland and as seen in the polemics between

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radical-right parties and the Brussels-based bureaucracy. When in government, the radical right takes measures to strengthen executive power and weaken internal and external checks and balances by targeting the media and bypassing parliamentary scrutiny.

Yet, all parties have nuances in their foreign and EU policies—especially those parties included in government coalitions, where strategic compromises shape their outlooks. Given her nationalist and pronounced Euroskeptic background, Meloni's positions in favor of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and against Russia and her overall constructive engagement with EU institutions initially reassured critics, who had expected disruptive policies à la Orbán.<sup>10</sup> However, her socially conservative and illiberal domestic policies, her strong ties to the Trump administration, and her recent return to Euroskeptic rhetoric have reawakened these worries. The Italian government supports EU initiatives that suit its interests, such as the NextGenerationEU fund for the post-pandemic recovery or the externalization of asylum policies, but otherwise takes an increasingly skeptical stand toward efforts to develop European integration.

The other radical-right prime minister, Orbán, now in power for fifteen years, has hardened his authoritarian domestic policies that target independent media, nongovernmental organizations, and the LGBTQ community.<sup>11</sup> He has ramped up his anti-EU agitation and continued to cultivate his friendships with Russia and China. Orbán celebrated Trump's return to power as a vindication of his own policies and attempts to build a broad alliance of illiberal political forces that would eventually overcome his relative isolation in the EU. At the same time, Orbán now faces serious domestic challenges. The Hungarian economy is doing poorly; €19 billion (\$22 billion) in EU assistance has been blocked because of concerns over the rule of law; and Péter Magyar's opposition party is leading the polls ahead of the 2026 parliamentary election.<sup>12</sup>

The Slovak government, led by Robert Fico, a Social Democrat turned right-wing populist whose government depends on the support of the radical-right Slovak National Party, has followed a similar trajectory to Hungary's, characterized by increasingly illiberal domestic policies, opposition to support for Ukraine, and overall Euroskepticism.<sup>13</sup> These policies are vehemently resisted by parts of Slovak civil society and have triggered massive protests. While broadly aligned with Hungary's policies, Fico has so far avoided a similar rupture with the EU's mainstream political forces.

The experience of the Finns Party (FP) can serve as a counterexample.<sup>14</sup> Originally a starkly Euroskeptic party, the FP signed up to a pro-EU coalition agreement in 2023 and even switched to a more pro-Western party group in the European Parliament to distance itself from pro-Russia parties. In the EU context, the FP is tough on migration but strongly supports Ukraine and has converged to a mainstream position on other policies. In its campaign for the 2024 European Parliament elections, the FP claimed to be Finland's most pro-European party. Finnish voters, however, did not reward this moderation and halved the FP's vote share at the polls.

# The Radical Right's Impact on the EU

The radical right has made its presence felt in three of the EU's institutions—the European Parliament, the European Council, and the Council of Ministers. In terms of policies, the radical right's most notable influence has been in the areas of migration and asylum.

## The European Parliament

The 2024 European Parliament elections resulted in a significant realignment of political forces. The centrist conservative European People's Party (EPP) once again emerged as the largest group; the Socialists and Democrats (S&D) held their position; but the other parties in the centrist coalition that had shaped politics in the last parliament—the Liberals (Renew) and the Greens—lost many seats. Radical-right parties gained considerable ground, though not to the extent that many had predicted. Altogether, about 25 percent of members of the European Parliament (MEPs) belong to such parties.

As in the past, ideological divisions, national antagonisms, and different attitudes toward Russia made it impossible for the radical right to form one united group. Instead, it split from two into three factions. The Patriots for Europe (PfE), including the National Rally, Hungary's Fidesz, and the FPÖ, emerged as the third-biggest group in the parliament, after the EPP and the S&D, supplanting Renew. It has a distinctly Euroskeptic profile and includes several pro-Russia parties. The relatively more moderate European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group, where Meloni's Brothers of Italy and PiS have the most seats, came fourth. The AfD, which Le Pen deemed too radical to be part of her alliance, and several smaller, like-minded parties formed a third grouping, called Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN). As in the last parliament, these three radical-right groups have little internal cohesion and are split on many votes.

The mainstream parties once again implemented a *cordon sanitaire* to block representatives of the PfE and the ESN from assuming leadership positions in the parliament. This policy does not cover the ECR, which has enjoyed a degree of legitimization and now holds three committee chairs and has three members on the parliament's bureau, which lays down the legislature's rules. The election of Ursula von der Leyen for a second term as president of the European Commission, which was supported by the mainstream parties, was mostly opposed by the three rightist groupings.

The 2024 elections changed the political dynamics in the parliament by reinforcing the pivotal role of the EPP, which no longer has to rely on the S&D, Renew, and the Greens to achieve a majority but can opt for cooperation with radical-right groups. The EPP leadership claims to remain committed to the *cordon sanitaire* and the exclusion of any “structured”

cooperation with radical-right groups.<sup>15</sup> It has promised not to cooperate with parties that fail the three tests of being “pro-Ukraine, pro-Europe, [and] pro-rule of law.”<sup>16</sup> But in fact, the EPP has gone for this alternative majority several times, including on a resolution on the 2024 Venezuelan presidential election, demands for tougher measures against irregular migration, motions to weaken the EU’s climate legislation, and commitments to international assistance.

The EPP’s tendency to team up with the radical right has prompted strong criticism from the other centrist groups. They claim that this shift undermines trust and threatens an effective legislative process, which needs to rely on a stable coalition of centrist parties. However, growing skepticism of the European Green Deal, a hardening of attitudes toward migration, and a new emphasis on protecting national sovereignty are making this alternative majority more attractive. Also, the EPP sees advantages in having different alliance options. History has shown that the power of the radical right often depends on the cooperation it receives from mainstream conservative forces.

## The European Council and the Council of Ministers

In a February 2025 speech at a PöE rally, Orbán proudly declared, “Yesterday, we were the heretics, today we are the mainstream.”<sup>17</sup> As far as the EU’s central decisionmaking forums are concerned, this claim appears premature. At the time, Orbán may have hoped to soon be joined in the European Council by an Austrian or a Romanian radical-right leader, but as this did not happen, the Hungarian prime minister remains a lonely figure in the EU’s top body. Yet, the upcoming parliamentary election in the Czech Republic threatens to change these dynamics, with Babiš set to return to power.

In neighboring Slovakia, Fico shares Hungary’s skepticism of support for Ukraine but generally avoids antagonizing the big EU member states, while Meloni shows little interest in coordinating policies with the Hungarian leader. This situation has not deterred Orbán from ramping up his confrontations with the commission and most member states, especially in the face of difficulties at home. He has blocked military assistance to Ukraine, tried to dilute EU sanctions against Russia, objected to the beginning of accession talks with Ukraine, and frequently threatened to take important EU projects hostage to unblock the funds for Hungary that are frozen under various conditionality mechanisms.

So far, then, the European Council has more of an Orbán problem than a radical-right problem. This can, of course, change if more Euroskeptic politicians rise to prime ministerial or presidential office. As the EU’s external challenges become ever more urgent, the union is exploring options to circumvent Hungarian blockages. The European Council has begun to adopt its meeting conclusions on Ukraine as statements on behalf of twenty-six rather than twenty-seven member states. The EU has partly outsourced its work on military support for the country to a coalition of the willing.

If Orbán eventually blocks the renewal of the EU's sanctions regime against Russia, the union could transfer major elements of the regime to a different legal basis, such as trade policy, which would allow decisions to be made by a majority vote rather than unanimity. If the Hungarian veto of Ukraine's EU accession negotiations persists, there is some support for launching the talks anyway on an informal basis.

Some member states advocate tackling Hungary's obstructionism more directly by finally putting the EU's Article 7 procedure into operation. This process, which has been languishing in the council for seven years, could result in Hungary's voting rights being suspended if it is found to be in breach of EU values. However, the article's extremely high thresholds for making decisions mean that such an initiative is very unlikely to succeed.

## Policies and Reforms

The radical right's biggest success consists in shifting mainstream opinion toward a significantly more restrictive policy on migration and asylum. Traditional parties, seeking to reclaim voters from the right, have adopted harsher rhetoric on migration, which has normalized the right's hardline agenda. Humanitarian concerns have been sidelined by a preoccupation with security, and long-standing principles of international and EU asylum law are now under threat.

By contrast, the union's parallel tendency to dilute its climate policies is driven primarily by widespread worries about the EU's economic competitiveness and a reluctance to adjust traditional lifestyles. But this trend is welcomed and actively promoted by radical-right parties, which can easily integrate their opposition to the EU's climate policies into their anti-elite and anti-EU narratives.

On foreign policy, radical-right parties have failed to overcome deep divisions, in particular in their relations with Russia, the United States, and China. On other matters, such as military security and many aspects of the EU's economic policy agenda, radical-right parties rarely offer a distinct policy platform but mostly support the traditional positions of their respective states. Unlike many mainstream parties, however, they emphasize stronger national military capacities rather than collective security assets and are skeptical of transnational efforts to support the defense industry.

Trade is one area in which radical-right parties are clearly distinct from the mainstream. In keeping with their antiglobalization bias, most of them tend toward protectionism and oppose the commission's trade liberalization policies. Similarly, on economic reforms,

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such as those proposed in 2024 reports by former Italian prime ministers Mario Draghi and Enrico Letta, radical-right parties tend to reject stronger collective action at the EU level and defend the sovereign prerogatives of the member states.<sup>18</sup>

## The Trump Effect

Trump's 2024 reelection promised to be a historic moment for the European radical right. In a break with past policy, the new U.S. administration publicly and repeatedly supported the radical right in European elections. In February 2025, U.S. Vice President JD Vance used his trip to the Munich Security Conference, where in front of a traditional transatlanticist security policy audience he denounced Europe's "threat from within," to meet AfD Leader Alice Seidel and endorse the party in the German federal election later that month.<sup>19</sup>

The administration's next endorsement was for Simion in the Romanian presidential race in May. Meanwhile, U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem traveled to Poland to endorse Nawrocki just days before the second-round run-off of that country's presidential election. The impact of such endorsements is hard to assess: Simion was narrowly defeated, while Nawrocki won even more narrowly, but there is little evidence to suggest that the United States' involvement influenced the vote.

Members of the Trump administration see the European radical right as "civilizational allies" in the fight against globalist ideas promoted by the EU.<sup>20</sup> For the European radical right, Trump has proved a mixed blessing. If some radical-right leaders, such as Simion, have been legitimized or strengthened by the Trump administration's backing, for others he risks being a poisoned chalice. The base of France's National Rally, for instance, has always embraced anti-Americanism. Outside Hungary, Trump is not particularly popular in Europe, though his standing has improved significantly among radical-right voters since his first term.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, expectations that a liberal anti-Trump wave would play out in Europe as it did in Canada and Australia were also misplaced.

Growing ideological alignment and the so-called anti-woke platform bring the radical right closer across the Atlantic, legitimizing and mainstreaming radical-right political discourse. Trump's domestic policies can have the diffuse effects of emboldening illiberal leaders, strengthening radical-right parties' networks, and inspiring actions abroad—just as Orbán's playbook has been inspirational in the United States.<sup>22</sup>

Aside from this impact, which might favor the radical right, the United States' hostile policy agenda toward Europe on trade and security has been of more consequence. This stance complicates the calculus for radical-right leaders as they balance anti-U.S. public opinion with their own ideological alignment while working out how to handle incipient trade wars and the security risks of the uncertain U.S. commitment to NATO.

As the only European leader to attend Trump's 2025 inauguration, Meloni had hoped to bridge the differences between the United States and Europe on trade and security. But once it became clear that any influence in Washington would not soften Trump's penchant for tariffs, she fell back on trying to steer Brussels toward a nonantagonistic response to the president's trade war. Several European radical-right leaders who are not in government had to balance their agreement in principle with what Le Pen called "intelligent protectionism" with the damaging impacts of Trump's choices on Europe.<sup>23</sup> On Ukraine and security matters, Trump's apparent alignment with Russian President Vladimir Putin and treatment of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky at the White House in February 2025 stoked the European radical right's divisions over Russia.

Overall, U.S. involvement in European national elections has had mixed results. Polls indicate that support for Europe's radical right has been stable, with small gains in some countries, such as Germany and Spain, and small declines in others, such as the Netherlands, where the PVV pulled out of the governing coalition, and Hungary.<sup>24</sup> The radical right's pace of success in Europe does not appear to be shaped by Trump, even if leaders on both sides of the Atlantic are influencing each other's personal styles, ideological alignment, sense of entitlement, and political playbooks.

## The Radical Right Internationale

The radical right's ideological alignment follows the internationalization of essentially nationalist platforms and Make [Country] Great Again (M\*GA) movements. International contacts among radical-right actors have intensified in recent years, moving beyond former White House chief strategist Steve Bannon's early attempts at creating a right-wing "super-group" across Europe.<sup>25</sup> Today, the radical-right network is a web of handpicked actors and parties, with Orbán and Fidesz at its center, that rallies behind shared conservative values and opposes progressive identity ideology, such as what it calls the "woke agenda."<sup>26</sup> With Trump in the White House, this center may shift to the United States.

Orbán's strategy of establishing a radical-right coalition both in and outside the EU is arguably the most successful attempt at unifying forces. In 2024, the Hungarian prime minister revealed that his government had been engaged in the "programme-writing system of . . . Trump's team."<sup>27</sup> This involvement was led by the prime minister's political director, Balázs Orbán (no relation to the prime minister), who is described by sources in both the United States and Hungary as instrumental in nurturing transatlantic ties with actors such as Vance.<sup>28</sup> In the EU, Viktor Orbán has engaged in personal diplomacy and developed individual relations with like-minded leaders, including Meloni and the FPÖ's Herbert Kickl.



Fidesz has also led the way in creating a new generation of loyalist think tanks, which have emerged as conduits to sustain the radical-right coalition and as platforms to develop its ideology. The Hungarian think tanks the Danube Institute, the Center for Fundamental Rights, and the Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC) are all government funded and have enacted projects to strengthen cooperation with conservative voices outside Hungary. For instance, the Danube Institute has offered total funding of more than \$1.4 million to U.S. far-right researchers, some of whom worked in Trump's administration.<sup>29</sup> Through its Young Conservatives program, the institute brings together several radical-right youth organizations, including from Italy's League, Portugal's Chega, and the U.S. Republican Party, with the objective of enhancing global cooperation on the right of politics.<sup>30</sup>

The MCC has collaborated with Polish ultra-conservative think tank Ordo Iuris, jointly designing policy recommendations to address challenges faced by the EU.<sup>31</sup> These ideas include proposals to overhaul the European Court of Justice and reduce the power of most EU institutions. Like its Hungarian counterparts, Ordo Iuris has strong ties with PiS, and some of its members held senior positions in the PiS government; for example, Aleksander Stępkowski, the co-founder and first president of Ordo Iuris, served as undersecretary of state in the PiS administration.<sup>32</sup>

Another soft-power framework adopted by the international radical-right network is the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), founded in the United States in 1974. Hungary, through the Center for Fundamental Rights think tank, started holding CPACs in 2022, and Poland followed with its first conference in May 2025.

These new actors and platforms allow radical-right leaders to network with each other and coordinate their support in major elections. Orbán's efforts, more specifically, mark a pivotal evolution in radical-right coalitions by fostering personal ties among conservatives across the Atlantic and positioning think tanks as conduits for transnational cooperation. However, despite these developments, the radical right's coordination continues to lag behind that of its mainstream counterparts, as the liberal-centrist parties can count on long-standing policy networks and personal relationships. Most notably, the radical right in Europe is arguably fragmented where it matters most, for example in the European Parliament, where it is represented by three different groups.

## Conclusion

European radical-right parties continue their electoral ascent, including in countries that had until recently been immune to this phenomenon. These parties' difficulty in translating their electoral success into executive power—only five EU governments currently include radical-right parties—should not make supporters of liberal democracy complacent. As long



as radical-right parties continue to win increasing shares of the vote, their rise to government is only a matter of time. Firewalls can be effective, but as these parties grow in power, such cordons become more difficult to sustain. Almost always, it will be center-right and conservative parties that are responsible for determining whether and under what conditions a radical-right party has a pathway to executive power.

Where radical-right parties have made it into government, their record is uneven. There are cases, particularly when a radical-right party is a junior partner in a coalition, when the daily reality of government results in moderation and convergence with the mainstream. In other cases, radical disruptive policies persist.

Orbán's Hungary has paved the way by dismantling democratic institutions and building an economic model to sustain his power. The outcome is an illiberal and authoritarian Hungary that aims to undermine the EU and limit the union to a single market. Meloni's government has been marked by a mix of pragmatism in EU and foreign policy and illiberal trends in domestic policy. Whereas in the past these parties focused mostly on national issues, the lesson of Orbán and Trump is that an active foreign policy can help consolidate power in government.

Contrary to popular assumptions, the Trump administration's open support for radical-right parties and politicians in Europe has not directly bolstered their appeal or widened their electoral bases. While the U.S. president has dealt a severe shock to the European political mainstream, Trump's effects on the fortunes of the radical right appear mixed.

On the one hand, ideological alignment across the Atlantic on anti-woke and antimigration policies can empower radical-right politicians, and Trump's strongman attitude can reinforce similar tendencies in some European capitals. A transnational radical-right ideology is shaping up through international hobnobbing and learning from each other's tactics. Orbán's Fidesz, particularly, has been supporting and organizing this network, which also has a strong Anglo-American component. It is a network that draws inspiration from the attractiveness of the political-economy model that is behind the enrichment of many authoritarian leaders.<sup>33</sup> This approach is attractive for European radical-right leaders, and the more successful the Trump administration is in getting its way, the more inspiring its tactics will be for like-minded leaders abroad.

On the other hand, MAGA's Europe agenda is at odds with European economic interests and alienates potential European radical-right voters. While Trump's popularity has grown among radical-right voters, except those with traditional anti-American sentiments, European public opinion at large is skeptical of the U.S. president, which complicates the radical right's calculus. Indeed, while the

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radical right has entrenched its position in politics, it seems that Trump's diverse impacts on these parties have not significantly altered their electoral prospects. Nor has the Trump effect helped the European radical right to build a common platform.

Still, the radical right has achieved considerable blocking power in the EU at a time that requires major reform and boldness. Proposals to strengthen EU-level collective action—whether on foreign policy, EU enlargement, a stronger monetary union, a capital markets union, expansion of the EU budget, or the rule of law—will certainly run into the radical right's opposition. That opposition will also have an impact in countries where the radical right is not part of the government, as it will reduce mainstream parties' room for maneuver to go beyond their traditional positions. To limit the threat of stagnation and blockage, mainstream governments and parties need to mobilize and ramp up their cooperation. Only in this way can they ensure that the EU remains capable of responding to the challenges before it.

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