

The Shifting Sands of Europe: How Political Trends Might Reshape EU Unity Towards Ukraine

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While the war in Ukraine has significantly affected the EU economy, leading to a severe energy crisis and increased inflation, it has also resulted in a push towards greater strategic autonomy. Yet, as the EU continues its economic, military, and humanitarian aid to Ukraine, such a support and the prospect of future enlargement for the country could be challenged by the rise of right-wing populist parties in the European Parliament, following the June 2024 elections. Chances that these parties will be able to form effective coalitions and change EU approach towards Ukraine are limited. Yet, current uncertainties surrounding the U.S. presidential elections as well as a general fatigue towards the Ukrainian issue should result in a close monitoring of the problem.

To date, a majority of EU citizens support humanitarian aid towards Ukraine. Yet, consensus on military aid and Ukraine's accession to the EU is less overwhelming. Moreover, an average of 70% of EU citizens is not in favour of prioritising Ukraine over other issues.

Ukraine's potential EU membership poses financial and political challenges, particularly concerning the EU budget, cohesion policy, and agricultural subsidies. At the same time, while EU membership is a merit-based process, the war will certainly undermine Ukraine's ability to meet the accession criteria and enforce the necessary institutional reforms.

Regardless of the outcome of the U.S. Presidential elections, the EU must act as a key global player and ensure that its commitments to enlargement, military, and economic support for Ukraine remain strategic priorities. This involves addressing public fatigue and managing internal political dynamics to build cohesion around this issue.

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1 Introduction

On August 23, a day before the Ukraine Independence Day, Ukrainian Flag was unfurled in front of the European Commission headquarters as a way to highlight the EU profound commitment in supporting Ukraine. In a video message, Ursula Von der Leyen, Eu Commission President, claimed that “Europe will always be at Ukraine’s side, because Ukraine is Europe” and its freedom and security are also the EU ones. Even more recently, on September 19, the European Parliament passed a resolution assessing that without the lifting of the current restrictions and the insufficient supplies of ammunition and weapons, Ukraine will not be able to fully exercise its right to self-defence and will remain exposed to attacks on its people and infrastructure. It also called on EU Member States to maintain and expand their sanctions against Russia.¹ Against this backdrop, with 131 members of the EU Parliament voting against the resolution and 63 absenting, the paper aims at analysing the EU support towards Ukraine and assess whether the rise of right-wing populist parties, evidenced by the results of the June 2024 EU Parliamentary elections, could challenge it, especially in view of the US Presidential elections. Certainly, extreme right-wing parties and populist groups within the European Parliament are far from representing the majority of Europeans. Still, they are covering an important number of seats within the Parliament and could leverage their positions within national political arenas. In order to understand if such a risk is real, the paper assesses the level of economic and military support provided by the EU to Ukraine and filters the results by triangulating data on citizens’ perspectives on enlargement and the war. In conclusion, it attempts to provide some recommendations in order for the EU institutions to maintain the promises and enlargement prospectives the EU has committed itself in front of Ukraine.

2 EU Support Towards Ukraine: Setting the Background

The unprovoked Russian aggression towards Ukraine in 2022 was a turning point for recent European history. Two years after, the negative effects of the war in Ukraine, in terms of human life losses and destruction, have been far-reaching. At the same time, the war has been having detrimental consequences on the EU too. From an economic point of view, the EU, which at the beginning of the war in Ukraine was just about to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic, started to register negative trends. The European Commission's 2021 Autumn Forecast projected 4.3% growth in European gross domestic product (GDP) for 2022, and 2.5 % for 2023. Yet, actual growth was 3.5 % in 2022, and 0.4% in 2023. Related to that is the fact that the war resulted in a severe energy and cost-of-living crisis in 2022, the effects of which have persisted into 2023 and even 2024. Higher energy prices and uncertainty have contributed to rising inflation rates, especially in October 2022, with increasing costs for both EU citizens and companies. To control inflation, bring it back to the 2% target level and keep prices stable, until June 2024 when they were cut, the European Central Bank has rose interest rates, making the cost of loans and money in general particularly high.² At the same time, a process of regionalisation of the global market began to take place, pushing the EU to adopt an alternative strategy to remain competitive, which was encapsulated in the concept of Open Strategic Autonomy. Launched by President of the Commission Ursula Von der Leyen within the post Covid-19 EU recovery plan, the idea of Open Strategic Autonomy (OPA) has indeed been progressively accepted at the EU level as the best strategy to protect EU interests in a regionalized world, while promoting trade and partnering with key regions

¹ European Parliament. (2024). [Ukraine must be able to attack legitimate military targets in Russia, MEPs say](#)

² European Parliament. (2024), [Economic impact of Russia's war on Ukraine: European Council response](#)
European Central Bank. (2024) [We have cut interest rates. Why did we do it and what does that mean for you?](#)

and countries.³ At the same time, beyond the far-reaching economic consequences, the war in Ukraine and the perceived safety threats in its neighbouring regions resulted in the European Union striving to boost internal unity in the areas of security and defence, traditionally its weakest points. Indeed, before the Ukrainian war, within the European Foreign and Security Policy (EUFSP), encompassing the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) as well as national foreign policy endeavours carried out in coordination with EU institutions⁴, there was not a solid unity of intent. Some Member States, such as France, supported a European defence system, while Central and Eastern EU countries, such as Poland and the Baltics, were more Atlanticist and believed that NATO and the US were enough to provide protection to the EU borders. Yet, the Russian aggression in Ukraine and the possibility of Donald Trump re-election as President of the United States have been pushing the EU to think how to protect itself in case of an US disengagement from the West. Indeed, security seems to have become an even more regionalized matter than market economy. Lately, on June 27th, 2024, the European Council approved the Strategic Agenda 2024-2029⁵, which sets the main priorities for the work of the European Union's institutions for the next five-year period. Alongside the commitments to promote a free, democratic, prosperous and competitive Europe, the Agenda aims to foster the European strength and security reflecting a common aspiration to boost the role of the EU as a global actor in the international arena. Yet, as Mario Draghi highlighted, there is a need for a European defense governance model to be defined by the Commission, the European External Action Service and the European Defense Agency in order to create a centralized "Defense Industry Authority" to organize European defense procurement.⁶ At the same time, with an average of 77 per cent, the majority of Europeans still consider NATO essential to their own country's security.⁷ Yet, Trump's threat of U.S. disengagement from Ukraine, as well as his encouragement to Russia to do "whatever it wants" in states that fail to comply with their NATO commitments⁸ have resulted in European countries attempting to "Trump-proof" the alliance.⁹ In this context, the summit held in Washington on July 9-11th, 2024, not only allowed NATO members to reaffirm their willingness to scale up military aid to Kyiv but also to highlight their future commitments in terms of defense spending.¹⁰ For instance, Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni pledged to increase Italy's defense spending to 2% of its GDP before 2029, in line with other NATO members that have met this goal over the past decade.¹¹ Additionally, the need for a geopolitical Europe able to be strategically autonomous not just in terms of heightened competitiveness but also in protecting its borders have resulted in increasing military and humanitarian aids to Ukraine as well as in the opening of an enlargement path for the country. While political will has, until now, secured the EU and its Member States' steadfast assistance to Kyiv, as well as unprecedentedly fast progress towards its accession into the EU, the consolidation of the populist-right and far-right in the European Parliament (EP) after the June 8th-9th elections raises the

³ Guerrieri, P., & Padoan, P. C. (2024). European competitiveness and strategic autonomy.

⁴ Borri, R., Isernia, P., Mingardi, C., & Olmastroni, F. (2024). [European Public Opinion on the Challenges and Future of EU Foreign and Security Policy](#).

⁵ European Council. (2024). [Strategic Agenda 2024-2029](#).

⁶ Politico. (2024). [Defense firms need full access to EU cash as Putin haunts Europe, Draghi says](#)

⁷ Borri, R., Isernia, P., Mingardi, C., & Olmastroni, F. (2024). [European Public Opinion on the Challenges and Future of EU Foreign and Security Policy](#).

⁸ Sullivan, K. (2024). [Trump says he would encourage Russia to 'do whatever the hell they want' to any NATO country that doesn't pay enough](#). CNN Politics.

⁹ Bateman, T. (2024). [US allies try to 'Trump-proof' Nato - but is that even possible?](#) BBC.

¹⁰ NATO. (2024). [Washington Summit Declaration](#). Issued by the NATO Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Washington, D.C.

¹¹ [Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries \(2014-2024\)](#).

question of whether this will still be the case in the next political cycle.¹² To date, pro-Russian Hungarian prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, has founded a new European Party: the Patriots for Europe¹³ (84 Members of EU Parliament), which has become the third-largest political group in the European Parliament. Meanwhile, the German far-right party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), which, in 2024, was accused to be infiltrated by Chinese and Russian spies¹⁴, has given rise to a new European alliance, gathering other forces at the extreme right of the political spectrum. Next fall's American elections might result in new fractures among EU countries, or on the contrary, in a renovated unity, especially on foreign policy affairs. Whether far-right European political groups will successfully manage to exert influence over the EU foreign policy agenda remains contingent upon their ability to create broad coalitions, as well as their level of engagement in the European institutions.

3 An Overview of the European Military, Financial and Humanitarian Aid to Ukraine

To date, the EU's unwavering commitment to supporting Ukraine has included unprecedented sanctions against Russia, aimed at weakening its economy and possibly its military power, but also military, financial and humanitarian aid to Ukraine and its people. Specifically, figures reported by the Kiel Institute for the World Economy show that, in 2023 and 2024, the EU commitment to support Ukraine through military and social aid has been growing, reaching over EUR 152 billion as of April 30th, 2024 and so far, the real deployment of funds has been of 87 billion euro, 60% less of the promised aid.¹⁵ This figure increases to EUR 102 billion when including Iceland, Norway, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. More specifically, when it comes to military aid, the EU has allocated 47.87 billion euro, versus the 50.37 billion euro of the US, as of April 30th, 2024. Within the EU, Poland was the country contributing the most in terms of military aid at the beginning of the war. As for 2024, Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Germany have been the most important donors, with Germany contributing alone with 10.11 billion euro, albeit the country increasing economic pressure. Additionally, in May 2023, the German government committed to provide 10.5 billion euro between 2024 and 2027 in military support to Ukraine for funding future industry purchases. Also the Baltics have been contributing. For instance, Lithuania declared in 2023 that a new program of 200 million euro was set to fund Ukrainian military between 2024 and 2026. So far, around 20 million euro have been effectively allocated. Conversely, military assistance from Italy appears quite limited (below EUR 2 billion), but the low level of transparency regarding the country's aid to Ukraine is mentioned as one possible explanation for such a low figure.¹⁶ Regarding financial aid, the Kiel Institute reported that as of April 30, 2024, EUR 21 billion from the U.S., and EUR 33.7 billion from EU Institutions had been allocated, in addition to the bilateral financial aid provided by individual Member States. Financial aid via the EU budget and from EU Member States has taken the form of loans, grants, guarantees as well as central bank swaps. Moreover, through the Ukraine Facility, a dedicated instrument to support the country, the EU aims

¹² Hooghe, L. et al. (2024). The Russian threat and the consolidation of the West: How populism and EU-skepticism shape party support for Ukraine. *European Union Politics*. 25 (2). Balfour, R., et al. (eds.). (2024). [Charting the Radical Right's Influence on EU Foreign Policy](#), Brussels, Carnegie Europe

¹³ European Parliament, [Patriots for Europe Group's Members](#)

¹⁴ Politico. (2024). [Far-right AfD reels as German lawmakers slam party over espionage and corruption allegations](#)

¹⁵ Kiel Institute for World Economy. (2024). [Ukraine Support Tracker](#)

¹⁶ Bomprezzi, P. et al. (2024). [Ukraine Support Tracker – Methodological Update & New Results on Aid "Allocation"](#). The Kiel Institute for the World Economy.

to finance reconstruction and modernization, promote economic recovery, and help Ukraine uphold the goals it needs to access the EU.¹⁷

Lastly, the EU and its Member States together have provided EUR 3.2 billion in humanitarian aid to Ukraine – EUR 860 million and 2.3 billion respectively.¹⁸ EU assistance has taken various forms, including cash and health care aid, as well as the supply of critical items through the Civil Protection Mechanism. Coordinated by the European Commission through its Emergency Response Coordination Centre, assistance under this mechanism has included the delivery to Ukraine of medical kits, shelter equipment, firefighting tools, and medical evacuations of patients in need of urgent treatment to hospitals in other European countries.¹⁹ To grant protection to the large influx of Ukrainians fleeing the conflict, the Temporary Protection Directive (Directive 2001/55/EC) was activated for the first time on March 4th, 2022, conferring temporary residence permits to refugees and providing them with healthcare assistance, shelter, access to education and the labour market. In June 2024, the Commission asked for a second extension of the Directive until March 2026. Indeed, the number of Ukrainians in need of protection in Europe remains high. As of July 15th, 2024, 6.021.400 refugees were registered in European countries.²⁰ The highest numbers were recorded in Germany (more than 1.000.000), followed by Poland (between 500.000 and 1.000.000 refugees) and Czech Republic (between 300.000 and 500.000).²¹

So far, however, these measures have been accompanied by varying degrees of support from EU citizens according to the date collected by the European Parliament. As of February 2024, approval rates were higher for humanitarian aid (89%) and for hosting refugees (84%). Moreover, 72% of EU citizens agreed on keeping sanctions on Russia and the same percentage supported financial aid to Ukraine. Conversely, lower figures were observed regarding support for providing military aid to Ukraine, with 55% of respondents in favor.²² Yet another pool from Ipsos in March 2024 shows a more nuanced picture. According to it, while in Northern European Member Countries such as Sweden (68%), Denmark (59%) and Finland (57%) but also in Mediterranean Portugal (55%), a majority of citizens believe that Ukraine is a primary issue and are in favor of a next institutional cycle that is more proactive in its support, different data are observed elsewhere. Standing, on average, at 70%, in the rest of the EU, citizens who believe that Ukraine is an important issue but should not be prioritized or those that regard it as a secondary issue, represent a majority. In Hungary, only 12% of the citizens believe that Ukraine should be prioritized. In Germany, France and Italy, those who believe that Ukraine is an EU priority are respectively 38%, 30% and 28%.²³

¹⁷ European Parliament. (2024). [EU assistance to Ukraine and scrutiny of the EU financing provided](#). Briefing. 18 March 2024.

¹⁸ European Council. (2024). [EU solidarity with Ukraine](#).

¹⁹ European Commission. (2024). EU Civil Protection Mechanism. https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/what/civil-protection/eu-civil-protection-mechanism_en. Accessed on July 15th, 2024.

²⁰ Data retrieved from [UNHCR Operational Data Portal](#).

²¹ UNHCR. (2024). [Ukraine Situation Flash Update #70](#). 14 June 2024.

²² European Parliament. (2024). [Public Opinion on Russia's War against Ukraine](#).

²³ Euronews. (2024). [Should the EU continue to support Ukraine? Our poll finds Europeans are in favour](#)

Table 1: National perception of the strategic importance to keep supporting Ukraine.

Country	A Priority	Important but not a priority	Secondary	Sum of those who believe it is a secondary issue or important but not a priority by country
Sweden	68	24	7	41
Denmark	59	30	11	41
Finland	57	34	9	43
Portugal	55	36	9	45
Netherlands	51	34	14	53
Spain	46	35	18	62
Germany	38	35	27	63
Poland	37	37	26	65
Belgium	35	41	24	66
Bulgaria	34	33	33	69
Czechia	31	36	33	70
France	30	38	32	71
Austria	29	39	32	71
Italy	28	41	30	75
Romania	25	36	39	75
Slovakia	25	36	39	82
Greece	17	37	45	88
Hungary	12	41	47	88
Total Average	38	35	25	63
Average from those countries, where the majority of citizens believe Ukraine is not a primary issue, even if important, or a secondary issue	/	/	/	70

Source: Ipsos, own re-elaboration

From this framework, it is clear that, up to present, public opinion is still supportive. Yet, there is a growing fatigue towards Ukraine that might be exploited and fueled by political parties, which could build their political momentum not only on the cost of Ukraine military aid, undermining the chances for strengthening the Union's determination for further integration in security and defense, but particularly on the enlargement perspectives for Ukraine and its correlated financial cost.

4 Security Concerns and the Renewed Importance of Enlargement

Faced with the need to defend its territorial integrity against an imperialist aggressor like Russia, the EU has revived the old foreign policy tool of enlargement, now conceptualized as a geopolitical investment in peace and security, and a cornerstone for the Union's strategic sovereignty.²⁴ Enlargement is now intended as security building mechanism, aimed at reinforcing the EU's external borders while bolstering the resilience of its peripheries.²⁵

In contrast to the stalemate in the accession process of the Western Balkan countries, which eventually resulted in their growing disillusionment over their membership perspective,²⁶ EU institutions have proceeded with Ukraine and Moldova's accession processes at a rapid pace. Indeed, negotiations with the two countries were opened on June 25th, 2024, only two years after their applications.

Challenges to Ukraine's accession are particularly pronounced as it has become the first country to apply for EU membership during wartime. Despite the favorable stance of EU institutions and Ukrainian public opinion towards its accession (as of the end of November 2023, 78% of Ukrainians supported EU membership),²⁷ the country's entry into the EU remains contingent upon several factors, including compliance with the requirements set by the 1993 European Council in Copenhagen.

²⁴ European Council. Council of the European Union. (2024). [Enlargement then and now: A geopolitical investment in peace and security - Speech by President Charles Michel for the 20th anniversary of the 2004 EU enlargement. 29 April 2024.](#)

²⁵ Anghel, V., & Džankić, J. (2023). Wartime EU: consequences of the Russia – Ukraine war on the enlargement process. *Journal of European Integration*, 45(3), 487–501.

²⁶ Elezi, G. (2023). [Dealing with “enlargement fatigue” to avoid “patience fatigue”.](#)

²⁷ Rating. (2023). [Twenty-fifth national survey: dynamics of Ukrainians' attitudes towards International Unions. 22-23 November 2023.](#)

Table 2: EU Enlargement: public opinion on Ukraine being granted EU candidate status (2023)

Country	Totally disagree (%)	Tend to disagree (%)	Don't know (%)	Tend to agree (%)	Totally agree (%)
Portugal	1	2	7	56	34
Sweden	3	5	7	30	55
Lithuania	3	7	6	36	48
Croatia	5	9	3	45	38
Poland	4	11	4	45	36
Denmark	4	13	4	31	48
Ireland	4	9	8	34	45
Finland	5	11	9	35	40
Latvia	6	11	11	32	40
Malta	11	13	6	46	24
Netherlands	8	18	4	33	37
Spain	7	9	15	32	37
Belgium	7	22	5	45	21
Italy	8	19	7	43	23
Luxembourg	10	18	6	41	25
Germany (West)	12	18	5	38	27
European Union	11	17	8	37	27
Estonia	12	15	11	31	31
Germany	15	18	6	36	25
France	14	18	11	35	22
Greece	11	24	9	35	21
Romania	11	25	8	38	18
Slovenia	19	22	7	27	25
Hungary	18	27	6	32	17
Cyprus	17	22	14	26	21
Austria	23	23	7	30	17
Slovakia	27	18	10	31	14
Czechia	20	26	11	27	16
Bulgaria	18	19	21	28	14
Germany (East)	27	21	10	25	17
Average		14%			32%

Source: Eurobarometer & Statista

The Commission has adopted a firm stance regarding the need for Ukraine to meet all the necessary economic, political and normative criteria.²⁸ It is thus reasonable to think that its accession will be delayed due to the additional challenges posed by the wartime scenario. While only an average of 14% of the EU citizens is against EU enlargement towards Ukraine, and 34% appears to be in favor, considerable concerns have also been expressed by EU Member States regarding the impact of enlargement to Ukraine on the EU budget.

More specifically, in view of the next EU's Multiannual Financial Framework, the financial document governing the EU budget, fears have arisen regarding its consequences on the EU Cohesion Policy and

²⁸ European Commission. (2022). [Communication From The Commission To The European Parliament, The European Council And The Council. Commission Opinion on Ukraine's application for membership of the European Union](#). COM(2022) 407 final.

Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), and the costs it would impose on EU Member States. Ukraine's low level of GDP per capita would result in shifts in the allocation of cohesion policy funds, leading to a reduction of the flow of money from the Union's budget to its wealthiest regions. Moreover, Ukraine's agricultural land make up more than a quarter of that of the EU. This means that, if the country were to join the EU prior to a CAP reform, farm subsidies currently received by EU Member States would decrease by about 20%, harming the competitiveness of their farms.²⁹ These adjustments would add to an already complicated economic context, with Russia's war against Ukraine playing a central role by leading to higher gas prices and the European Union's need to source supplies from other markets, as well as facing increased defence spending. However, the reality may be less worrying than expected. First, the MFF is negotiated every seven years by Member States according to their own priorities and needs and has internal adjustment mechanisms to mitigate possible changes in the amount of funds received by individual Member States. In this respect, in previous enlargement processes, new Member States did not immediately receive the full amount of funds, but, as reported by the Jacques Delors Institute, transition periods have been planned.³⁰

Finally, as mentioned above, additional challenges to the country's accession have arisen due to European elections results. Indeed, despite the prominent roles of the Commission and the European Council in the enlargement process and its negotiations, the EP plays a significant role in monitoring the candidates' progress and their adherence to the EU's *acquis*. Moreover, the EP's assent, requiring a majority of its component members, is a prerequisite for an accession treaty to be signed, as stipulated by Article 49 TEU.³¹ In order to assess the likelihood of both the enlargement impetus as well as aid to Ukraine coming to a halt, it is first necessary to explore the role that the EP plays in EU foreign policy and analyze the far-right stances on these foreign policy issues.

5 The European Parliament and EU Foreign Policy: Ideology and Coalition Building

The question of whether a tilt to the right in the EP will impact EU's foreign policy has acquired increased prominence since last June's elections. Indeed, while CFSP remains largely intergovernmental in character, with the EP retaining only limited powers on it, the institution is nonetheless able to exert its influence through various tools. Non-binding resolutions allow it to outline its stance to other institutions, while recommendations addressed to the Council and to the High Representative (HR), its competences over the EU budget, and discussions of CFSP matters during consultations with the HR represent additional instruments of influence.³² The "two-level game" logic explaining domestic and international interaction provides an additional lens through which to analyze the possible implications of the Parliament's composition on EU foreign policy agenda.³³ Indeed, in national contexts where far-right forces have garnered significant support, the pressures on Heads of governments to satisfy the preferences expressed by larger domestic groups can directly influence their voting behaviors in the

²⁹ European Parliament. (2024). [Ukrainian agriculture From Russian invasion to EU integration](#).

³⁰ Lindner, J., Nguyen, T., Hansum, R. (2024). [What does it cost? Financial implications of the next enlargement](#), Jacques Delors Institute.

De Petris, A., Milia, S., Poli, E. (2024). Renewing the EU's Capacity to Govern its Future. How to ensure decision-making capacity and the defence of European values and sovereignty in the context of multiple challenges. Cep Network

³¹ European Parliament. (2023). [Enlargement policy: Reforms and Challenges Ahead. Briefing..](#)

³² Borgers, S. et al. (2022). [The European Parliament's role in Foreign and Security Policies: lessons from the Russian invasion of Ukraine](#). College of Europe Policy Brief.

³³ Putnam, Robert D. (1988). "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games." *International Organization*, vol. 42, no. 3, pp. 427–60.

European Council. Even more so, voting patterns in the Council may be affected if far-right forces were to increase their political tailwind in the upcoming five years, expanding their share votes, and, consequently, gaining greater presence in government.

Evidently, last June's elections have resulted in an increase in the number of seats of far-right forces compared to the previous legislature. The European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) now count 78 MEPs (+9). While the number of MEPs from Identity and Democracy (ID) used to stand at 73, Patriots for Europe alone now has 84 MEPs, and ESN 25, contributing to the political death of ID.³⁴ Despite these gains, whether EU's aid to Kyiv and pro-enlargement momentum will be jeopardized in the next five years will largely depend on coalition dynamics among far-right MEPs on the one hand, and mainstream forces on the other.

The first element that is crucial in shaping the future of EU foreign policy revolves around the far-right's ability to create a united front. An analysis of voting patterns in the EP during the 2019-2024 legislature conducted by Politico revealed that the percentage of MEPs votes with the majority as share of total votes was lower for ID (38.4%), followed by ECR (52.3%).³⁵ Should the next five years witness a similarly divided far-right, characterized by noisy opposition, abstentionism and obstructionism rather than proactive engagement, its chances of achieving policy change sharply decrease.³⁶ The current EP framework, characterized by the fragmentation of populist and far-right parties into three different groups – ECR, Patriots for Europe, and ESN – suggests that unity will be difficultly achieved, for various reasons. Firstly, the far-right appears to adopt heterogenous stances on some of the key foreign policy issues outlined in the new Strategic Agenda. Divergences emerge both across political groups and within them, increasing difficulties in drawing uniform inter and intra-party political lines. Russia's war against Ukraine serves as an example, with MEPs being influenced more by geography than by far-right affiliation. While ECR has showed unwavering support to Kyiv since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion, Russian sympathies can be observed in some political parties within Patriots for Europe, including Fidesz in Hungary, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) and Matteo Salvini's Lega in Italy, as well as in the ESN (AfD in Germany).³⁷

Similarly, divergences are also evident on far-right parties' stances on the EU's enlargement to Ukraine. Within ECR, PiS supports it, arguing it would enhance Poland's security, Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia (Fdi) is a lot more cautious, sustaining the need for a merit-based approach.³⁸ Further to the right, forces that were formerly in ID oppose enlargement due to concerns over its impact on EU budget and migration flows, reflecting their ethnonationalist stance. In Patriots for Europe, Rassemblement National (RN), the Dutch Freedom Party (PVV), and FPÖ are also against it. Regarding Fidesz, while Orbán has made Balkans's accession a policy priority of the Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the EU, he does not equally endorse enlargement towards Ukraine.³⁹

The second element that could prove decisive is the ability of pro-European mainstream forces to create a *cordon sanitaire* against the far right. This should not only consist in preventing the appointment of far-right MEPs to top-positions in the EP – an intention that they have already announced by

³⁴ European Parliament. (2024). [2024 European election results](#).

³⁵ Cerulus, L., et. al. (2022). [5 takeaways on Parliament's power dynamics](#). POLITICO.

³⁶ Barak, L. (2015). The roles of Eurosceptic Members of the European Parliament and their implications for the EU. *International Political Science Review*. Vol. 36(3), pp. 337–350.

³⁷ Carnegie Endowment For International Peace. (2024). [Mapping the Radical Right's Positions on Foreign Policy](#).

³⁸ Pagella Politica (2024). [Ucraina: il confronto tra i programmi per le elezioni europee](#)

³⁹ Von Der Burchard, H. (2023). [Scholz gets Orbán out the room to open Ukraine's membership talks](#). POLITICO.

committing to block Eurosceptic MEPs from receiving chairmanship to key positions in the EP Committees - ⁴⁰ but also in creating broad and cohesive alliances among themselves. While the current coalition among the European People's Party (EPP), the Socialists and Democrats (S&D), Renew and the Greens could ensure a stable pro-European majority, it remains to be seen whether such a colorful coalition, will be able to stick together and engage in a structural cooperation.

6 Drawing Conclusions: Is a Tilt to the Right of EU Foreign Policy Plausible?

Although the magnitude of populist and far-right electoral gains in the European Elections has not been as large as expected, their increased presence within the EP has nonetheless raised legitimate concerns over its implications for the EU, including its foreign policy, in particular the question of enlargement towards Ukraine and the continuous European military and economic support, might be challenged.

While members of extreme parties do not hold a majority in the European Parliament, they could capitalize on the widespread sentiment among citizens that Ukraine should not be a primary concern in the next European institutional round. This could potentially push for a shift in the EU's position. Although this prospect may seem unlikely today, it could become increasingly realistic if Trump were to win the next presidential election.

Nonetheless, as the paper outlines, the internal divisions among and in between far-right groups could lead to weaker opposition within the Parliament and a less convincing narrative, becoming an opportunity for mainstream pro-European forces to promote a positive narrative about enlargement to the European citizens. This effort should go beyond simply displaying the Ukrainian flag; it must address genuine concerns, primarily related to the economic sustainability of further EU enlargement and economic and military support towards the country. The latter, indeed, should continue to help Ukraine endure the war and achieve a final victory. Indeed, ultimately, what will convince citizens to keep supporting those EU member countries governments e politicians that sustain Ukraine and its path toward EU enlargement should be grounded in facts rather than rhetoric.

⁴⁰ De La Feld, S. (2024). [Cordon sanitaire against Orbán, Patriots to get no posts in the European Parliament](#). Eunews.



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