

The populist radical right in the European Parliament: A new force?

Does the rise of the populist radical right threaten the European integration process? Focusing on EU enlargement, [Marie-Eve Bélanger](#) and [Natasha Wunsch](#) show that populist radical right actors have been able to build an increasingly coherent discursive coalition opposing further widening of the European Union that is putting mainstream party families under pressure to respond.

Recent years have seen a rise of populist radical right forces across Europe. Inside the current European Parliament, they make up almost a third of MEPs, more than doubling their [seat share](#) in a decade. This increase in representation reflects growing public scepticism towards European integration. Still, ideological divergences have so far prevented populist radical right MEPs from forming a single party group inside the European Parliament. But have they found other ways to translate their growth in numbers into cohesive action at the European level?

In a recent study, we test the coalition-building potential of populist radical right forces in the area of EU widening, one of the two central dimensions of European integration alongside deepening. We focus on discursive mobilisation and assess whether populist radical right MEPs have been able to develop a cohesive and distinctive narrative on EU enlargement. And if so, to what extent is this narrative affecting debates on future widening more generally? Starting from the critical milestone of the Eastern enlargement round, we analyse parliamentary debates over the last three European Parliament mandates, spanning the period 2004-2019. We examine both the positions adopted by MEPs on enlargement and the arguments they use to frame their views.

Identity-based hostility towards enlargement

Our analysis highlights a growing reluctance on the part of populist radical right actors in the European Parliament towards the admission of further EU members, with a shift from 'soft' scepticism towards an outright rejection of further widening in the last European Parliament mandate. This hardening of populist radical right positions is mirrored by a rise of critical views of EU enlargement also among mainstream parties. In other words, overall support for membership drops across all party families, albeit more markedly for populist radical right actors.

At the centre of our study lies an analysis of the arguments different party families use to frame their positions on enlargement. Here, populist radical right forces truly demarcate themselves even from their closest ideological competitors on the right by rallying around an identity-related discourse that emphasises cultural and religious aspects.

Table 1 shows the five most frequent arguments employed by each party family to justify their position towards enlargement. Keywords indicate the specific argument employed by the actor, while colours represent overarching frame types explained in the legend.

Table 1: Five most commonly used arguments and frames for different party families

	Radical Left	Green	Socialist	Liberal	ChristDem	Conservative	PRR
1st	Bilateral Issues	Human Rights	Human Rights	Human Rights	Human Rights	Bilateral Issues	Belonging
2nd	Human Rights	Efficiency	Efficiency	Efficiency	Efficiency	Human Rights	Bilateral Issues
3rd	Conditionality	Bilateral Issues	Bilateral Issues	Cost-Benefit	Bilateral Issues	Efficiency	Human Rights
4th	Efficiency	Conditionality	Cost-Benefit	Conditionality	Conditionality	Conditionality	Religion
5th	Cost-Benefit	Reforms	Reforms	Reforms	Reforms	Minorities	Cost-Benefit

Procedural	Utilitarian	Strategic	Normative	Identity
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Note: For more information, see the authors' accompanying paper in the *Journal of Common Market Studies*.

In contrast to the convergence around technical arguments related to conditionality or institutional efficiency that characterises all other party families, populist radical right discourses display a unique emphasis upon arguments relating to ‘belonging’ and ‘religion’. This choice of framing signals what determines populist radical right rejection of a country engaged in accession negotiations: its perceived lack of a European identity.

From coalition to contagion?

By presenting a coherent, alternative narrative to that espoused by other party families, populist radical right forces fulfil the first condition for representing a discourse coalition. But does their essentialist rejection of enlargement affect European Parliament debates on widening more generally?

We are more cautious regarding the presence of contagion: whereas populist radical right representatives place themselves at the forefront of a generalised hardening of opposition towards EU enlargement, there appears to be no direct transfer of populist radical right framing patterns towards mainstream parties. Instead, we note a growing politicisation of EU enlargement that finds expression in a shift from technical arguments focused on conditionality towards a dominance of political arguments which, in practice, have resulted in a slowdown of accession negotiations.

Overall, our findings indicate that despite populist radical right framing patterns not (yet) translating into mainstream parties’ discourses, their collective strengthening and strong contestation of further EU enlargement is putting mainstream parties under increasing pressure to respond.

The need for a mainstream party response

Our analysis of populist radical right discourses signals a striking internal unity among populist radical right parties. Despite their institutional fragmentation across different party groups, diverging national backgrounds, and differing degrees of Euroscepticism, populist radical right MEPs have been able to rally around a common set of positions and frames on enlargement and build a coherent and distinctive narrative in this area.

This finding suggests that populist radical right actors’ growth in numbers inside the European Parliament is increasingly matched by an ability to formulate cohesive positions on core issues of European integration. In light of their capacity to organise into a convincing discourse coalition, populist radical right actors can no longer be dismissed as marginal or unable to coordinate. On the contrary, for mainstream parties to ignore this development means to underestimate its threat potential to the broader process of European integration, at the risk watching from the sidelines as populist radical right forces translate their discursive strength into an ability to shape political outcomes.

Instead, mainstream parties must confront the rise of alternative narratives in the European Parliament by adopting similarly clear positions on issues that are highly salient for public opinion and detailing the arguments underpinning these positions for European citizens. In the case of enlargement, this might amount to acknowledging the growing politicisation of accession negotiations, while nonetheless spelling out under which conditions a further widening of the Union would be in the interests of current member states and their citizens. More generally, pro-European forces need to face up to growing Euroscepticism not by blurring their positions, but rather by formulating strong and positive messages regarding the benefits of European integration for member states and citizens alike.

For more information, see the authors’ accompanying paper at the [Journal of Common Market Studies](#)

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [CC-BY-4.0: © European Union 2021 – Source: EP](#)
