

Eurorealist or Eurosceptic? Assessing the future of the European Conservatives and Reformists after 2019



The European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) are currently the third-largest group in the European Parliament, but with Brexit set to deprive the group of one of its largest members – the UK's Conservative Party – there is uncertainty about the ECR's future trajectory. [Martin Steven](#) writes that despite Brexit, there is every indication the ECR will continue after the next European Parliament elections in 2019, but it remains to be seen whether the group will shift in a more Eurosceptic direction or maintain its relatively neutral identity as a vehicle for free market conservatism.

One of the more intriguing aspects to the speculation that Emmanuel Macron wants to reconfigure European politics in much the same way as he has French politics is the question of what happens to the centre-right in the European Parliament. President Macron's desire to create a liberal and pro-European party that can directly take on the growing number of Eurosceptic MEPs has caught the imagination of many in Brussels who sense a fightback is now in the air against populist, nationalist politicians.

One of the key motivations in Macron's idea is to try and compensate for the decline in electoral support for Social Democrat parties in Europe, like his own former French Socialists, as well as in other large member states such as Germany, Italy and Spain. Yet there are also interesting questions surrounding how this will impact upon the potential alignment of parties on the EU's right of centre, especially the Christian Democrat European People's Party (EPP) and the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) – the latter presently the third largest group in the European Parliament but broadly misunderstood or ignored by journalists and academics alike.

The ECR is the main voice of *Conservatism*, as opposed to *Christian Democracy*, in European Union politics – the group's MEPs argue for an EU which places greater emphasis on free market economics and less on trying to choreograph 'ever closer union'. For this reason, the ECR's driving force, the British Conservative Party, had never been comfortable sitting alongside Christian Democrats in the European People's Party, and in 2009 it formally split from the EPP. The ECR has become a permanent feature in EU affairs in Brussels – and currently holds the balance of power as kingmaker beyond the grand coalition of the EPP and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D).

Despite this, detailed analyses of the ECR's activities have been few and far between – the widespread assumption apparently being that it is merely another peripheral Eurosceptic group soon to disappear after Brexit. Yet the ideological distinction which leading ECR MEPs promote between 'Anglo-American' conservatism and the continental social market model gives the ECR a political 'USP' that may have longer term benefits beyond even the United Kingdom leaving the European Union. There is now every indication that the group will continue after the 2019 parliamentary elections.

Nevertheless, the departure of all the British Conservative MEPs undoubtedly poses a challenge for the ECR, especially if it wishes to retain its position as the third largest group in the Parliament. One option could be for its leadership to try to attract more free market orientated parties that are currently sitting in other political groups, for example: the Republicans (LR) from France and the Moderate Party in Sweden who both currently sit in the EPP, and the Free Democrats (FDP) in Germany and the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) from The Netherlands who both sit in ALDE (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe).

In particular, the ideological differences between the FDP and the ECR's German delegation, the Liberal Conservative Reformers (LKR), are surely miniscule, and one might have thought some sort of merger within Germany may be possible here – indeed, there were some formal talks in 2015 but they ultimately came to nothing. If leading ECR figures such as Jan Zahradil, the 'Thatcherite' Czech Civic Democrat (ODS) MEP, could persuade even two out of these four parties to join the ECR, its image as the EP's party of trade and free market economics would be secure. In 2014, Belgium's biggest party, the right of centre New Flemish Alliance (N-VA), chose to leave EFA and join the ECR, so there is already a precedent for how the group can approach the process.

Table: Political ideology of the main ECR member parties

<i>Party</i>	<i>Member state</i>	<i>Ideology</i>
<i>Conservatives</i>	UK	Centre-right
<i>PiS</i>	Poland	Nationalist
<i>LKR</i>	Germany	Economic liberal
<i>N-VA</i>	Belgium	Secessionist nationalist
<i>DF</i>	Denmark	Right-wing
<i>ODS</i>	Czech Republic	Economic liberal
<i>PS</i>	Finland	Right-wing

Note: Compiled by the author.

Clearly, however, ideological cohesion is not necessarily the only consideration when looking at the way member state parties choose to join groups in the European Parliament – for example, it has been widely noted that the way MEPs from the populist Fidesz in Hungary are allowed to sit in the EPP is somewhat bizarre. Indeed, analysing the longer term prospects for the ECR suggests a mixed picture. The ongoing strength of electoral support for its delegation from Poland, Law and Justice (PiS), set against the exit of British Conservative MEPs, means that its political philosophy may actually become less conservative and more *nationalist* after 2019.

It is Fidesz, as well as Austria's Freedom Party (FPÖ), that are presently looking the likeliest candidates to join the ECR as the group tries to cement its position as the leading 'critical voice' in the European Parliament – yet if that is the ambition of some of the ECR's leadership, that would represent a shift away from its relatively neutral identity as the vehicle for free market conservatism that it enjoys at present. It would also refute the argument currently deployed by the ECR that it is not Eurosceptic at all but 'Eurorealist', the voice of common sense in the EU and its only true 'honest friend'.

Over the next year, the ECR has an opportunity to continue to provide a centre-right voice in the European Parliament which is not in favour of 'ever closer union', and build up alliances with like-minded moderate conservative parties in Europe that can last until 2024. Whether or not its leading MEPs choose to follow that path or instead embark on a more openly 'Eurosceptic' road may lie with the influence of the number of Law and Justice MEPs elected in 2019.

Along with Fidesz in Hungary, Law and Justice can be said to represent, in part at least, a type of populist, nationalist politics that borders at times on respectability – not 'far right' certainly but still distinct from what would be considered mainstream in Western European countries. Similar criticisms have been made of the more peripheral ECR member parties such as the Danish People's Party (DF) and the Finns (PS). There has always been something of an ambiguity surrounding whether or not the ECR's leadership tolerates these parties for expedient reasons or whether it actually implicitly endorses some of their more radical right opinions on multi-culturalism and immigration. The outcome of the 2019 elections will go some way to providing an answer to some of the more ambiguous elements of the ECR's 'Eurorealist' politics.

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